2010

# Urban Neighbourhood Associations: People, Organizations, and Place

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*Your file Votre référence*
*ISBN:* 978-0-494-75385-9
*Our file Notre référence*
*ISBN:* 978-0-494-75385-9

# URBAN NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATIONS: PEOPLE, ORGANIZATIONS, AND PLACE

by

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**Honours B.Sc., University of Toronto, 2005**

**THESIS**

**Submitted to the Department of Psychology**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for**

**Master of Arts**

**Wilfrid Laurier University**

## Abstract

In a world increasingly "globalized" through advances in transportation and communication, place still matters. Our urban communities, dense and mixed in character, are homes for important social, economic, and political institutions and relationships (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2006), with volunteer-run neighbourhood associations bringing the voices of community residents into the conversation. My research with two such groups in Kitchener, Ontario, originally focused on organizational characteristics that aided their work in addressing neighbourhood issues such as crime, but later expanded to include considerations of the urban context within which both groups belong. Semi-structured qualitative interviews with association members and external actors highlighted the importance of leadership, organizational structure, flexibility, and partnerships with external organizations. Safety concerns in the communities provided an initial impetus, with both groups focusing on specific issues and engaging in ongoing learning to improve their neighbourhoods. The associations also appear to benefit their communities indirectly by fostering residential pride and informal neighbouring activities. Based on insights from empowerment theory, urban studies, and my own critical reflections on my experiences living in urban neighbourhoods, I suggest that the associations are uniquely shaped by their settings, with structures and behaviours that respond to the complexity of life in our cities. In turn, these neighbourhood groups have the potential to address the paradoxes often encountered in urban living: by bridging the individual and the community, they serve as an example of a "third way" (Newbrough, 1995). This research provides suggestions for neighbourhood residents, groups, community practitioners, and researchers.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for the ongoing support from my supervisor, Dr. Richard Walsh-Bowers, who encouraged me in pursuing this alternative approach. From pointing me in the direction of specific examples of different writing styles, such as an article equating investigative journalism with qualitative research (Levine, 1980), to providing feedback and encouragement, I felt that he was always supportive. I am also thankful to my committee members, Dr. Scotney Evans and Dr. Peter Dunn, for working with me and providing feedback on how to ensure that my thesis would also fulfill the necessary academic requirements without sacrificing my style. Dr. Evans deserves a special thank-you, as my original adviser, for his support in creating my original thesis proposal and collecting the first set of data, and for staying involved with my thesis after leaving Wilfrid Laurier University. My gratitude also goes to my external committee member, Dr. Ginette Lafrenière, for the perspective that she brought to my thesis presentation and her thought-provoking comments and suggestions.

My two key contacts with the neighbourhood associations, Karen Taylor-Harrison and Debra Chapman, are both amazing women. Their passion and commitment for their respective neighbourhoods served as a personal inspiration. Likewise, the individuals willing to contribute their insights through participating in my study demonstrated the power of a small group of dedicated individuals to change the world. I can only hope that my words will do justice to their experiences, hopes, and dreams.

My gratitude also goes to Ray McGinnis and the other participants of a Writer's Retreat held at the Five Oaks Centre in August 2009. At this event, I learned that good writing incorporates epochal "spirit of the times" and timeless principles in addition to a

linear chronology; this conceptualization and suggestions on how to pay homage to all three ideas of "time" (Chronos, Epoch and Kairos) showed a path that would help me unify the stories of my thesis. With the encouragement of Ray and my fellow writers, I found my writing voice at that writer's retreat; without this experience, the paper before you would never have been.

Throughout the thesis, I found myself walking with a number of fellow students on this long road, both at Wilfrid Laurier University and other universities. In particular, I thank Krystal Kellington, whose academic journey and mine seem inextricably linked, for her ongoing friendship through both happy and trying times. Thank you also to the other students in my cohort: Keith Adamson, Shannon Cushing, Tyla Fullerton, Suzanne Killing-Wood, Chris McEvoy, and Amanda Weckworth. Other students shared the path at different points on our respective journeys, and I thank them for their support: Amy Lee, Shauna Fuller, Leah Gerber, Jacqueline De Schutter, Lindsay Rivard, Susan Eckerle-Curwood, Stuart Morris, Benita Loewen, Lisa Quinn, Ana Popovic, Jennifer Musial, Karla Gouthro, and Anita Gopal. I wish you all the best, as you continue wherever life's roads take you.

Other friends outside of academia reminded me that life exists outside of the books: these people include Ian Bradshaw, Bran Adams, Gordon Harris, Arpinee Shaboyan, Garen Hagopian, Anna Nguyen, Jimmy Pang, Anita Abraham, Phil Rogers, Matthew Ascah, Rev. Mary Savage and Rev. Geoff Carr. Thank you for being there and for keeping me grounded.

Last but not least, a huge heartfelt thank-you to my family. The support of my parents, Stefan and Jutta, and my brother Kevin, was never in question for me as I tackled

this project. Most importantly, though, was the unending love from Carolyn, my wife and partner in life. Even with her own scholarly commitments, she was there to reassure me in times of doubt, push me through indecision and uncertainty, and celebrate the small accomplishments along the way. Words cannot express my eternal gratitude, and I can only hope to be as supportive to you as you complete your Ph.D.

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## Preface on My Writing and Research

In this thesis, I use a writing style that is more personal and narrative than readers might anticipate in an academic thesis. My qualitative approach to the topic of neighbourhood associations introduced me to many voices and their stories: individual experiences of my participants, activities of the neighbourhood associations, histories of the neighbourhoods and the City of Kitchener, broader societal trends in Canada, and lastly my own experiences and growth in understanding as both an insider and outsider with the neighbourhood associations. These threads naturally interact and influence each other in non-linear ways, making it difficult to present my findings and insights in the linear form of writing.

In searching for a way to authentically present this multitude of voices in a coherent manner, I found inspiration from the world of music, a discipline that makes use of both structure and creativity to blend a cacophony of sounds into a harmonious symphony. In particular, I draw on the musical form of "theme and variations", as exemplified by works such as British composer Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations. In such a piece, a basic musical theme is first presented, followed by a number of variations on that theme. The variations often feature different instruments and follow a variety of musical styles, but each includes some reference, obvious or subtle, to the main theme.

In my thesis, the abstract and introductory pages could be interpreted as setting the theme of the piece. The chapters of my thesis are also labeled as "variations", representing the influences of different voices on the theme, specifically existing theoretical and empirical literature, my participants' insights and my own thoughts. This musical metaphor has elsewhere been used in academia: for example, a special issue of

*Organization Science* focusing on jazz improvisation and organization made use of similar terms, with an overture, variations on a theme, and a coda (Meyer, Frost, & Weick, 1998).

Neither is the timeline of this thesis what readers might anticipate. As the result of life circumstances, I had to step back from this work after my initial data-collection and analysis. In retrospect, what I viewed initially as a challenge or barrier in fact provided me with the opportunity to reflect on neighbourhood associations in a new way. I hope that my writing faithfully portrays both my original findings and later insights in a way that provides a unique perspective on our neighbourhoods.

**Urban Neighbourhood Associations: People, Organizations, and Place**

The world is increasingly embodied in its cities. As of 2008, more than half of humanity called an urban area home, while highly industrialized countries such as Canada passed that mark several decades earlier and now have more than 80% of their population residing in an urban area[1] (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). Although the implications of this trend may be open to debate, the fact that our planet is urbanizing is not.

Modern transportation provides the means for people to move to cities and navigate its environs. Social and economic pressures alternately push people from rural-based lives and pull them to denser areas where a hopefully better life awaits. This migration becomes international, giving rise to places filled with a diversity of people and cultures unimaginable a few generations previous. Our cities become microcosms of our world, but not just in terms of demographics. Problems related to inter-group conflict, resource allocation, environmental degradation, social upheaval, and human rights, to name a few, are commonly viewed as global issues, giving rise to questions such as "What can be done to balance the rights and responsibilities of the individual and the collective?" and "How do we encourage mutual respect between people from different cultural and faith backgrounds?". These questions also play out daily in urban areas the world over; with the demographic changes noted above, global issues and urban issues become inextricably linked.

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[1] An urban area is defined by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada as: "... an area with a population of at least 1,000 and with no fewer than 400 persons per square kilometer." (2010).

My original aim for this thesis was to identify individual and organizational factors that enable volunteer-run neighbourhood associations to impact their communities. I conducted qualitative interviews and a focus group with two such associations in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada: the Cedar Hill Community Group and the Cherry Park Neighbourhood Association[2]. Residents within each of these two neighbourhoods have joined together to address local issues, most notably crime, but their influence extends beyond discrete changes and improvements.

By listening for and hearing the voices of many people, including community members who participated in the project, researchers and thinkers who have walked similar paths before me, and my own ideas and reflections, I gained an appreciation of the links among person, community, and place. By weaving these threads together, I hope to investigate if neighbourhood associations can fulfill Newbrough's (1995) promise of a "third position" that moves away from the liberty-collectivity dichotomy to a community that balances the needs of both the one and the many in our cities.

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[2] Within this thesis, I refer to these organizations by "Cedar Hill" and "Cherry Park". Although these names could be used to refer to their respective neighbourhoods, unless otherwise specified, when I use these names I am referring to the organizations specifically.

## Chapter / Variation 1: Neighbourhoods and Associations

### Urban Histories

> *Perhaps one important element neighbourhood associations bring to the table is the emphasis on place. Local and particular versus global and universal is an ongoing paradox in this world, and cities are caught in it, as are the neighbourhoods within them. Cities benefit from bringing a critical mass of people together, which allows for specialization - economic and social. A business with a niche market may not have a sufficient customer base in a town of 10,000, but can operate profitably in a city of 100,000 or 1,000,000. Likewise, finding like-minded people who share similar interests or beliefs becomes easier as the size of the city increases. But herein lies the paradox - that store or social group may not be on your block or in your neighbourhood or even your part of town. If intracity transportation is sufficient for the distances involved, the location to some degree becomes irrelevant* (personal reflection, October 1, 2009).

Kitchener, as a city, tells a story that is perhaps familiar to many other cities and towns across North America: a town settled by successive waves of immigration, initially from Europe, specifically from Germany and Britain in the case of Kitchener, and now from across the globe. The influence of those initial settlers can be seen in street names, institutions, and traditions. The influence of the Aboriginal peoples who were in this area for thousands of years prior is less visible, despite ongoing land claims. Recent arrivals may not have the same influence as earlier settlers yet, but as in much of the rest of Canada, they are increasingly growing as part of the area's fabric. Rich farmland was the

initial draw, though this focus gave way to industrial possibilities. Kitchener became a manufacturing centre, with names like Kaufman and Electrohome commanding respect. Factories and warehouses litter the city's historic core and its nearby neighbourhoods, mute testimony to a different era.

Although just under a quarter of the experienced work force in Kitchener still identified manufacturing as their occupation in the 2006 Census (Statistics Canada, 2008), the sector's strength is diminished today. In the decades following the Second World War, these industries relocated, first outside of town and then outside of the country. Likewise, many people moved away from the historic centre, the widespread adoption of the car making it possible to live in suburban settings while working in the urban core.

We can see in North America, particularly in the United States, how the psychogeographical landscape was drastically altered by the spread of the personal automobile. Support was given for returning soldiers to buy newly-built homes, while new highway construction across the continent facilitated the creation of new "communities" far away in rural-like settings, yet still within easy reach of the jobs and amenities of the city.

Urban planners, influenced by reductionism, believed that complex phenomena such as crime and poverty could be understood through simple concepts (Jacobs, 1961); they sought to impose control in city cores by razing older areas and creating modern housing projects based on rational scientific principles. Highways slashed across established neighbourhoods and concrete edifices to progress were built on the rubble of existing communities. Even if those settings could be considered slums, areas

concentrated in poverty, what followed would be worse, giving rise to terms such as "urban decay", "blight", "the projects", and "white flight". The individuals in these areas included African-Americans and other historically oppressed groups, though this fact often went without saying with little, if any, consideration of the resulting disproportionate impact.

Voices spoke out against this plan of "progress." Jane Jacobs, a woman having no formal education in planning or urban affairs, save her own personal experiences living in New York City, could see that such initiatives and their underlying rationale ignored the human dimension. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, first published in 1961, espoused basic principles of city life that are still referred to today: Life attracts life. Diversity of use attracts different people at different times of the day. Many eyes on the street, especially those who are invested in the well-being of the neighbourhood, create a sense of collective safety. The form and function of the built-environment influences our thoughts, our feelings and most importantly our behaviours, which in turn influences the environment. Cities are best regarded as examples of organized complexity, where small changes can reverberate and cause unintended effects.

**Canadian Urban Development**

Canada was perhaps spared the worst of America's excesses in the 1960's, but the trends were followed nonetheless. Africville was a historically black community on the outskirts of Halifax; after decades of municipal neglect, it was demolished between 1967 and 1973 to free up space for a multi-lane bridge (CBC Archives, n.d.). Regent Park is the exemplar in Canada of a run-down, crime-filled housing project; created initially as

part of this "progress" in the 1950's, it was not until the mid-2000's that work began to redevelop the site to create a more livable space.

Like in the United States, community-led resistance to such redevelopment was successful in some areas. In the early 1970s, work began on a highway between the northwest suburbs and downtown Toronto. The intended route of the Spadina Expressway would have paved an ecologically-sensitive ravine and cut through an established downtown neighbourhood. Local residents, including by this time Jane Jacobs, successfully petitioned the provincial government to withdraw its funding for the project, effectively killing it in 1971. The premier of Ontario at the time delivered the famous lines of "If we are building a transportation system to serve the automobile, the Spadina Expressway would be a good place to start. But if we are building a transportation system to serve people, the Spadina Expressway is a good place to stop."

Despite this soundbite, new highways in the suburbs allowed for sprawl to continue apace; rather than outright destruction, cities faced decline. Which option is worse? In many Canadian cities, suburban residential, commercial, and employment options created an exodus of prosperity from downtown cores. I saw this impact personally growing up in a suburban neighbourhood of Winnipeg. The city was once proudly nicknamed "The Chicago of the North," and its downtown Exchange District is still home to historic buildings from the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century that testify to the city's past glory as a gateway to Canada's western provinces.

However, Winnipeg's geographic and historic centre now highlights a competition between glass skyscrapers and endemic poverty. Gang violence and substance abuse are mainstays of the community. Every time I go back and happen to pass through that area,

it seems that none of the efforts being put forth, be it from residents, non-profit organizations, businesses, or governments, is having any noticeable positive impact.

No longer living in Winnipeg, and having never resided in or near that downtown area, I do not know if my impressions are accurate. Change can be almost invisible when it starts, particularly in the eyes of an outsider; even to an insider, however, it can be difficult to discern. For example, when I asked my participants about the impact of their respective neighbourhood associations, one common response centered on informal interactions with neighbours. Participants reported that with their involvement in the group, they became more likely to engage in casual conversations with other people in the community, or even just to offer a smile and a hello when passing someone on the sidewalk. This friendliness even extended to saying hello to complete strangers walking through the neighbourhood!

Such behaviour may not seem out of place in an idyllic, small-town setting, but the image appears jarring when juxtaposed with a modern urban environment. Common perceptions of city neighbourhoods include extreme anonymity and alienation; such traits may even be desirable in comparison to that prototypical small town, where everybody knows everybody including their personal affairs. For anyone who does not meet the community norm, this stance is certainly understandable. On the other hand, the separation of self from others can be damaging for the well-being of both individuals and communities (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

As a result, although this shift in behaviour may seem like a small change, it can be the start of something broader. I experienced this change myself during my two years of living in the Cherry Park area. As I began meeting other community residents through

the neighbourhood association, I started saying "hi" to them and other residents when I saw them on the streets. My wife and I began to talk with our neighbours, not just those immediately next to us but also most of the people on our block. We also started nodding and saying "hi" to perfect strangers on the sidewalk.

It may be difficult to assign causation for this change to my involvement in the neighbourhood association. I had lived in Toronto for six years previous to moving to Kitchener: without stereotyping either city too much, the pace of life in the latter is definitely slower compared to the larger centre and perhaps more amenable to these informal interactions. However, from those six years in Toronto, I recall very few (if any) attempts on my part to reach out to others in my immediate neighbourhood, while those two years in Kitchener are replete with examples. I would prefer to assume that I experienced some personal growth and learned a new way of living, rather than believe that cities above a certain size are inherently hostile to the building of human connections.

**Approaches to Community Improvements and Change**

My initial interest in community development did not focus on informal social interactions in neighbourhoods; rather, my attention was on "improvement," specifically concrete, physical changes. I was strongly influenced by the American community organizer Jim Diers, who gave a talk on his "Seattle model" of grassroots community development in Kitchener a few months after I moved to the city. Diers's method (2004) incorporated elements of two distinct approaches to community development in order to bring residents together to improve their neighbourhood: Alinsky's (1946, 1972) community organizing approach with a focus on power, and McKnight's community

development perspective that maximized the use of local assets (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

From Alinsky, Diers took to heart the message of "starting where the people are." Alinsky (1946, 1972) was famous for his efforts in the Stockyards neighbourhood of Chicago in the 1930s and 40s, where he emphasized the importance of focusing on the concerns and issues facing local residents. A similar approach is being followed today by Industrial Area Foundations in Texas, where community members and local groups such as churches and unions work together to challenge those in power to improve conditions, particularly in marginalized communities (Warren, 2001).

John McKnight suggested a new direction for community organizers (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Although pressing issues can garner attention and unite people in work towards a common goal, there is a risk that focusing exclusively on problems may reinforce feelings of inadequacy and victimization. McKnight chose instead to work from an asset-based approach, reasoning that no community is completely without some type of resources, particularly human and social. Populations that have been viewed as contributing little in terms of traditional metrics of time, money, and specific skills are encouraged to work from their strengths. For example, senior citizens may have a greater understanding of a community's history, and by virtue of their age are accorded respect and deference in many cultures. Youth may be discounted because of (assumed) inexperience, immaturity, or apathy, but they can bring energy and enthusiasm to a community.

Diers (2004) melded these two approaches by encouraging full community-engagement and pushing residents to make use of pre-existing assets through several

innovative methods. For example, any group of residents, from a handful of neighbours on the same block to full communities, could apply for funding through a matching-grants program. Applicants would secure donations, volunteer hours, and material support from local businesses; the city would assess the total value of these resources and provide matching funds.

The presentation I attended was filled with photos of community gardens, playgrounds, public art, murals, and other physical improvements. It was those examples that initially influenced me, while I paid less attention to the stories of neighbours and community groups working together and finding common ground. One tale that did stick in my mind was the example of a group of seniors who chose to stand (or more accurately, sit) against drug dealers who used a street corner in their neighbourhood as their place of business. The seniors set up a table on that corner one evening, and proceeded to play card games under the streetlight for the better part of the night. Their actions not only denied the space to the drug dealers for that one night, but also signaled to the rest of the community that people cared about the state of the neighbourhood and were willing to back their convictions with action.

Working with Cedar Hill and Cherry Park helped me to realize the importance of these small but important actions, despite my initial overemphasis on the concrete and the idea that "CHANGE" must come in discrete tangible packages. The combination of entering a field of study that has the aim of improving our communities and the specific ideas from Diers's presentation (or at least the pieces I took away from it) led me wanting to go out and start making things better. I later realized that communities cannot be built

solely with brick and mortar, and that such physical signs can at best reflect the strength of a community and its members but do not directly embody it.

With the opportunity for reflection after presenting my thesis, I realized that I failed to include a historically prominent community worker, one whose example may have prompted me to define success more broadly. In co-founding Hull House, the first settlement house in North America, Jane Addams (1910) demonstrated how working in and with the community could lead to positive change. Workers at Hull House assisted newly-arrived immigrants by providing services, recreational activities, and educational activities, as well as through advocacy on immigration-related issues. Addams's efforts serve as a reminder of the importance of both individuals and community, service and advocacy. The settlement house movement plays a prominent role in the histories of both social work and community psychology (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005), and similar work continues today, such as at the Immigrant Workers Center in Montreal (Hanley & Shragge, 2009).

**Connecting with Neighbourhood Associations**

I had initially considered doing my thesis with neighbourhood associations, given my involvement with two such groups. In the fall of 2006, just shortly after I arrived in the city, I attended an all-candidates debate for the upcoming municipal election. The event was hosted by the Victoria Park Neighbourhood Association concurrent with their annual general meeting, a savvy move on their part as it introduced new people to the work of the association. By the end of the night, my wife and I were members of the association's executive, despite the fact that we lived just outside the neighbourhood

boundaries. Even with our other commitments during our time living in Kitchener, Carolyn and I remained active in the leadership of this group.

For some reason, it did not immediately occur to me that I should look for a similar association in my own neighbourhood. I learned about the Cherry Park Neighbourhood Association in the early months of 2007 from a classmate at Wilfrid Laurier University, who lived just around the corner from me and had been peripherally involved with the group's formation a few months prior. She recommended that I attend one of their meetings, which was held monthly at a local school. I did not record my observations from that first meeting I attended, but what I vaguely recall is that discussion among the twenty or thirty attendees was quite lively and centered mostly on crime concerns. I also remember being mildly disappointed by this focus. At the time, I did not see the changes that I later learned to be important accomplishments, so it seemed too limiting compared to the achievements described by Diers (2004).

Despite these initial feelings, I found enough to hold my interest and provide encouragement to attend future meetings. Looking back, I am glad that I did. There were overt signs that the neighbourhood association was heading in what I considered to be a promising direction, particularly with the creation of a community garden. I think I also found a familiar atmosphere, the kind of freedom that comes when a group starts with little more than a few people and some dreams. Later that spring, I signed up as a Street Representative for my block with the responsibility of delivering association newsletters, and started attending executive meetings and helping out at events.

**Standpoint and Roles**

Conducting research with neighbourhood associations would have been a logical choice given my experience with them; however, concerns about my role made me hesitate, at least initially. In my Masters' classes, we had discussed the insider/outsider dichotomy, how both bring advantages and disadvantages to the research process (Kirby, Greaves, & Reid, 2006). An outsider may bring new ideas and perspectives to the setting, while an insider may have a better understanding of the context through his or her own lived experience. An insider's pre-existing relationships and history within the community, and the outsider's lack of the same, may be a benefit or a hindrance: an outsider has to spend time cultivating trust, while an insider may face difficulties due to past actions or affiliations in the community.

Like other identity concepts, a researcher's position cannot be divided into stark terms; a researcher may play different roles at different points in the same project (Kirby et al., 2006). Some aspects of my identity would be consistent and visible throughout the research project, including my status as a white, educated, young man. However, other aspects were more malleable: I could be perceived as a researcher, a student, a neighbour, or a fellow volunteer, depending on who I was talking to, the topic of conversation, and the setting.

These issues surrounding standpoint are important considerations for qualitative research projects, but they were new ground for someone previously educated in a positivist framework where researchers are supposed to be as far removed as possible from their topics of study. In this project, I would not be coming in as a pure outsider, given that I had volunteered with one of the groups and lived within its boundaries. At

that time, I was concerned about my ability to successfully navigate any tensions between my roles as a community member and researcher. As a result, I decided not to pursue the topic at that time.

While looking into another idea (that I shortly thereafter found to pursue), I continued volunteering with the neighbourhood associations. Over Summer 2007, I was hired along with another student by the City of Kitchener to work with Cherry Park. Together we conducted a resident survey through most of the neighbourhood, and also searched for grants and other resources that could be useful for the group.

During this job, two discoveries surprised me initially; both turned out to be pivotal experiences in my personal and professional development. For the resident survey, our first idea was to create a two- or three-page paper survey to distribute to households in the community, which residents would then mail back to us. When we brought our idea to the association executive, with their insight into their neighbourhood, they recommended that we go out, door to door, and actually talk with people in the community to learn from them in person. We shortened our survey and started knocking on doors; in the process we met some interesting people and learned more about the history of the neighbourhood. The lesson I drew from that experience is that community members can hold great insight, and in community-based research a certain flexibility of thought and action is a definite requirement.

The second discovery clearly found a home in my consciousness, though it took some time to puzzle out its meaning. As part of our community canvassing, the other student and I developed small pamphlets promoting the existence of the neighbourhood association and some of its activities. In our draft, the first line proclaimed, "The Cherry

Park Neighbourhood Association is a group of like-minded people." But the executive was quick to inform us that they were not like-minded at all. They were individuals, even if they did work together as a neighbourhood association. What drew them together, at the time, I did not know. Later on through the interviews I learned that similar concerns and a shared place helped them to connect and work together.

This summer work also gave me some experience working in a dual-role setting with a neighbourhood association: this byproduct proved to be fortunate when I learned soon after the end of the contract that I would not be able to pursue my original thesis idea with a mainline Protestant Christian congregation, due to differences in timeline. Feeling more confident in my ability to navigate any role difficulties, I returned to the topic of neighbourhood associations for my thesis, based on my interests in volunteerism and organizational practices in volunteer-run groups.

**Roots of My Personal Perspective**

In addition to this time in the neighbourhood, my perspective was shaped by experiences gained prior to my arrival in Kitchener. My undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto may have been in psychology (and a very positivistic reading of the field at that), but my personal development grew in response to "outside the classroom" experiences, including volunteer opportunities. In particular, my involvement with the undergraduate Psychology Students' Association (PSA) showed me how enjoyable it was to work with a small group of energetic, dedicated people. We did what we could to combat the general atmosphere of apathy and alienation on campus, realities exacerbated by the large proportion of student commuters and an institutional indifference towards student life. Although we did not always succeed at bringing

students together and ensuring that the student voice was heard, I felt that at the end of my degree, I had made some small difference in that setting.

More personally, I discovered that I enjoyed this type of volunteer-based organizing work, which led me to enrolling in a volunteer management diploma-course the year after graduation. For the practicum component, I found myself working with a small, grassroots environmental-monitoring group. Citizens' Environment Watch (CEW) may have had more resources and structure compared to the PSA, but I felt the two groups shared a similar ethos best exemplified by the phrase often attributed to Margaret Mead[3]: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

My enthusiasm for working with these types of groups did not blind me to their shortcomings. Relying on a small number of people worked when the organization and its aims were likewise modest, but as they looked at accomplishing more, members risked "burning out." Losing members to burn-out could limit an organization's activities or even lead to its dissolution: in the latter case, the resulting disillusionment and the costs of restarting a similar organization could have a chilling effect on future organizing. Based on these interests, my initial approach to the topic of neighbourhood associations focused on their structure as volunteer-run organizations.

**Voices of Other Researchers**

I found a body of literature on neighbourhood associations in North America with a primary focus on organizational factors. Researchers such as Abraham Wandersman and Paul Florin (2000) studied different aspects of volunteer-run block associations over

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[3] Although this phrase is in keeping with Margaret Mead's professional work (The Institute for Intercultural Studies, n.d.), there is no confirmed source (Keyes, 2006).

a number of years, through initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Participation Project. This research primarily examined factors influencing participation rates, the benefits of their work, and most relevant to my interest in burnout, the factors which predicted organizational viability, including having a formal structure.

Comparative longitudinal studies that examined the differences between groups that remained active and those that ceased their work showed some surprising findings. Factors such as the size of the group and its age did not make a difference; large well-established associations were just as likely to disappear as small new ones. Instead, surviving associations were more likely to have organizational structures that encouraged the acquisition and efficient use of resources, including its membership (Prestby & Wandersman, 1985). Groups that remained active were more likely to have more visible and politically-efficacious leaders than inactive associations, decision-making in active groups tended to be more democratic, and active groups were more likely to have a formal structure with clearly defined roles.

Prestby and Wandersman's (1985) findings showed similarities with research on empowering organizations. Empowerment is often considered a cornerstone of community psychology, with a focus on the processes through which people gain control over their lives and environment (Zimmerman, 2000). Recent conceptualizations of empowerment have also made the distinction between what creates empowerment and the outcomes or indicators of empowerment; for example, activities such as skills development or participating in decision-making can lead to outcomes such as increased sense of control and networking with others (Zimmerman, 2000).

Certain settings, such as organizations and communities, can promote empowerment among the individuals within that context. Although empowering groups may differ in terms of overt mission and practices, past research suggests that they have certain organizational characteristics in common that provide individuals with the resources and support that are necessary for them to achieve their goals and gain a sense of control in their lives. For example, Maton and Salem (1995) conducted a multiple case study with a mutual self-help association, a religious fellowship, and an educational program, as exemplars of empowering organizations. They found a number of features in common: a group-based inspirational belief system, a peer-based support system, committed leadership, and multiple participation-opportunities. The latter component, labeled by Maton and Salem as an "opportunity role-structure," encouraged volunteers to undertake tasks that matched their own interests and skills.

Initial conceptualizations of empowerment have been criticized on several grounds. In her feminist critique, Stephanie Riger (1993) points out how empowerment values individual mastery, power, and control, concepts which are usually seen as masculine traits, while ignoring the benefits of community and cooperation which are traditionally viewed as feminine. Focusing too much on individual empowerment could lead to competition and conflict, and ignores the possibility of collective empowerment or even the co-empowerment of separate groups to work together (Bond & Keys, 1993).

Recent research on empowerment has expanded the focus of the concept to include organizations as entities that can be empowered (Zimmerman, 2000). In a framework proposed by Peterson and Zimmerman (2004), organizations can be empowered at three distinct levels: the intra-organizational level, representing internal

structures and processes that allow the organization to function; the inter-organizational level, where links between organizations enhance ability to access resources and knowledge; and the extra-organizational level, which represents the ability of the organization to effectively change the larger setting in which it exists.

Following this trend to focus on group and community empowerment, Maton (2008) explicitly defined empowerment as a group-based, participatory approach for both individuals and groups. In his summary of empowering settings, Maton differentiates between those that focus primarily on individual development and wellness, such as self-help groups and youth development organizations, and settings that work towards community betterment and social change, including civic engagement groups such as neighbourhood associations. Refining the model described above (Maton & Salem, 1995), empowering organizations usually possess a group-based belief system that inspires change, meaningful core activities, a supportive relational environment, and a highly accessible, opportunity role-structure. These groups also have committed leadership and learning-focused maintenance activities that enable and support the other four characteristics.

When viewed as a whole, this literature suggests that organizational factors can be important for neighbourhood associations. Practices such as peer support, multiple opportunities to participate, and collaborative efforts with other groups can produce benefits not just for the organization, but also the individual members and the community as a whole. Both the one and the many can benefit.

**Reflection on Purpose**

My involvement in Kitchener neighbourhood associations, together with my research interest in grassroots volunteerism, provides only a partial explanation as to why I proceeded with this project. I did not realize the other reason until my initial thesis-committee meeting, when I was asked what my proposed research contributed to community psychology research that had not been done before. Put simply, I was interested in why these particular neighbourhood associations existed and continued to be relevant at a time when groups such as these were not very common.

**Recent Literature: A World Without Neighbourhood Associations?**

The majority of the studies on neighbourhood associations cited above were conducted in past decades in the United States. Some studies have recently examined the impact of similar community groups, including in Canada (Wharf, 1999). Calgary has a history of community associations stretching back to the turn of the century (Davies & Townshend, 1994); these groups have focused primarily on social and recreational issues, including the building of recreational centres across the city. These associations have also provided input to the city on local planning projects. Next door to Kitchener, the city of Cambridge has a number of neighbourhood centres that provide social support and adult education in low-income areas, and also serve as a centre for community development (Derksen & Nelson, 1995: Powell & Nelson, 1997).

Most recent research in community development instead has examined other approaches. For example, organizers working with disadvantaged communities may return to Alinsky's school, rallying residents around a salient local issue such as poor quality housing or inequality in healthcare and education (Moberg, 2006). A Canadian

example of this type of organizing can be found in Montréal, where the immigrant community organized to form the Immigrant Workers Centre; this space provides support and education for workers, while also leading political campaigns relevant to immigrant workers (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2007).

Other community initiatives, exemplified by work such as "Yes we can!" (Foster-Fishman et al., 2006), use a project-oriented approach to build community-capacity. By bringing residents together to work on an achievable "small wins" project, momentum is generated that increases local willingness to tackle larger hurdles. Such community capacity-building can also pave the way for longer-lasting change by fostering social connections that can be used to access new resources, including political power (Saegert, 2005).

Some American cities, such as Portland, San Antonio, and St. Paul, have experimented with formal participation-structures that create neighbourhood-level representation in political and planning processes through district or community councils (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993). Although there is a risk that these groups can become another level of bureaucracy, they can provide space for residents, businesses, and community groups to discuss issues of mutual concern and work together to address them, as in Seattle (Diers, 2004).

In all of these examples, neighbourhood associations as local multi-purpose groups seem to be absent. However, perhaps this decline in community groups should not be taken as a surprise or be a concern. The term itself can conjure up images of a Norman Rockwell-esque scene from the 1950s, with homogenous neighbours working together in a homogenous neighbourhood. However, some would see a downside to the loss of this

form of community participation; for example, Robert Putnam would probably see the disappearance of "neighbourhood associations" (in this popular conception) as being a prime indicator of the decline in social capital.

Although social capital has existed as a concept for some time with various definitions, Putnam (2000) brought the term to the mainstream in his book, *Bowling Alone*. In an analogous manner to financial or human capital, social capital refers to the resources available in social networks and interactions that can be "generated" through social activity and later "spent" to achieve some outcome. Putnam defined the term as the social connections and ties between individuals, and asserted that the United States has faced a decline in this type of capital since the 1950s. As evidence, Putnam presents data showing drops in formal types of social engagement such as political parties, church groups, and bowling leagues (hence the book's title), as well as informal interactions such as dinner parties. Low social capital, he concludes, can have negative impacts on community safety, personal well-being, and ultimately the state of (American) democracy by threatening the healthy development of civic engagement.

Putnam's (2000) take on social capital can be critiqued on several grounds. First, measuring social capital can be problematic. Diers (2004) suggests that Putnam overstates the decline due to his choice of metrics. People may not be bowling in leagues, but neither are they "bowling alone;" rather, they participate in events with friends and smaller social groups. Likewise, new activities such as community gardens and potlucks are replacing those listed by Putnam.

Second, similar to concepts such as resilience and empowerment, one could co-opt social capital to further inequality by arguing that communities do not need outside

help or resources, but rather should use their own social capital to improve their neighbourhoods. This reasoning is ironic in light of the fact that social capital requires an investment of other resources to generate and maintain, such as time, money, and commitment, resulting in social capital becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of the privileged at the expense of marginalized groups (Wuthnow, 2002). As a result, disadvantaged communities may be told to rely on a resource that they increasingly cannot access.

Third, although Putnam views social capital as a resource that usually leads to positive outcomes, others view it in more neutral terms. Social capital can help build community and increase civic participation but there is no guarantee that such capital will be beneficial for all, as interpersonal connections may be used to build bonds within a group of like-minded people, rather than bridge different groups of people. The idyllic 1950s vision may hide a conformity and intolerance of those who do not look or act like the majority (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2006). In this example, social capital may be used by those in power to ensure that "undesirable" elements are prevented from taking permanent residence in a neighbourhood or to encourage those living there already to move away. In fact, some block associations and ratepayers' groups in the United States did engage in both covert and sometimes even overt activities to discourage African-Americans from living in their communities. Today, groups of residents may be labeled, fairly or not, as NIMBYs, highlighting their position to change in their community as "Not In My Back Yard".

Despite the potential for abuse, social capital can be a useful concept for community psychology research. Saegert and Winkel (2004) related social capital to both

collective efficacy and empowerment, and found that social capital was inversely related to perceived crime rates in a low-income apartment building. Their research suggests social capital can help protect against crime or conversely that crime may have a chilling effect on informal social connections. Interestingly, both Cedar Hill and Cherry Park formed initially in response to resident concerns about crime.

Saegert and Winkel (2004) suggested that the community-level focus of social capital could be augmented with empowerment theory in order to introduce an explicit recognition of values such as inclusion and equality. In my original thesis-proposal, I used the term civic capacity to represent this fusion of social capital and empowerment. As defined by Saegert (2005), civic capacity represents the ability to participate in the public domain, influence the physical and social environment, affect public priorities, and access resources. By nurturing and utilizing this capacity, I believed that neighbourhood associations could become empowered to bring about change.

Despite such theoretical and empirical use, the basic definition for social capital is still debated. For example, Hyman (2002) has suggested that the definition should go beyond the relationships between people to also include the resources that can be accessible through these social networks, a concept that appealed to me given my interest in community improvement and change. Perkins and Long (2002) unpacked social capital into four concepts (based on a 2 X 2 grid of Cognitions/Trust and Behaviours by Informal and Formal Organization), which includes sense of community, neighbouring, collective efficacy, and citizen participation. Embedded within this theoretical framework were the informal and other non-concrete ways that neighbourhood associations could improve their communities. Although initially merely a part of the model, this idea of the informal

gained importance as I listened to the voices of those in the neighbourhood associations and later to my own experiences.

**Future Role: The Potential for Neighbourhood Associations**

So, given the historical and popular depictions of neighbourhood associations as potentially irrelevant or solely self-interested groups, why did I want to work with them? I think it was for the same reason that I pursued my initial thesis idea with a mainline Protestant Christian congregation, another type of organization that is often seen as "dying." From personal experience, I had seen that both were not necessarily irrelevant in today's context. Both provided something important and should not be relegated out of hand to the junk heap of history.

In building the case for that initial idea and later my neighbourhood association proposal, I brought in the dichotomy between amelioration and transformation. Ameliorative interventions are reactive, individualistic, and short-term with a focus on lessening the impact of a pre-existing negative condition. Examples of amelioration include treatment of individual patients or a one-time clean-up of graffiti. Transformative work, on the other hand, seeks to proactively change conditions in order to prevent negative events from occurring in the first place or to lessen the impact when they happen (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

Based on an individualistic societal focus and the influence of a pathology-medical model, the western world has focused primarily on amelioration, in particular, amelioration of individual deficits. Although such efforts will always be required, their over-emphasis combined with the relative dearth of transformational projects means that many people suffer needlessly while waiting for a "cure." Medical history has shown

repeatedly that no illness can be eradicated through curing each patient; rather, preventative measures such as immunizations, promotion of healthy behaviours, and changing environmental conditions are needed (Albee, 1996).

Despite this fact, little resources are allocated to this kind of transformative work. Even in the field of human services, where people will often endorse the values and ideals of transformative change, it can be difficult to work against societal trends and focus instead on broader long-term change. In working with these organizations, Evans, Hanlin, and Prilleltensky (2007) suggest the adoption of an alternative model called SPEC (Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment, Community Change) to enable transformative work. Based on qualitative research with three exemplary non-profit groups, Perkins et al. (2007) suggest a hierarchy of development in community organizations: Individual members and the organizations themselves must shift from an ameliorative to transformative focus in order to create second-order change in their communities.

My hope at the time of writing my proposal was to see the neighbourhood associations engage in some form of transformative work. Returning to the example of graffiti, a one-time cleanup could improve the appearance of an area, but would do nothing to prevent additional graffiti; in contrast, addressing potential root causes (or facilitators) of the graffiti by improving lighting, fostering a sense of local pride, or providing space for people to engage in expression through "legal graffiti" could lead to consistent improvement in the long term. Here again, though, I was viewing "transformation" primarily in relation to specific, often concrete changes; I later learned

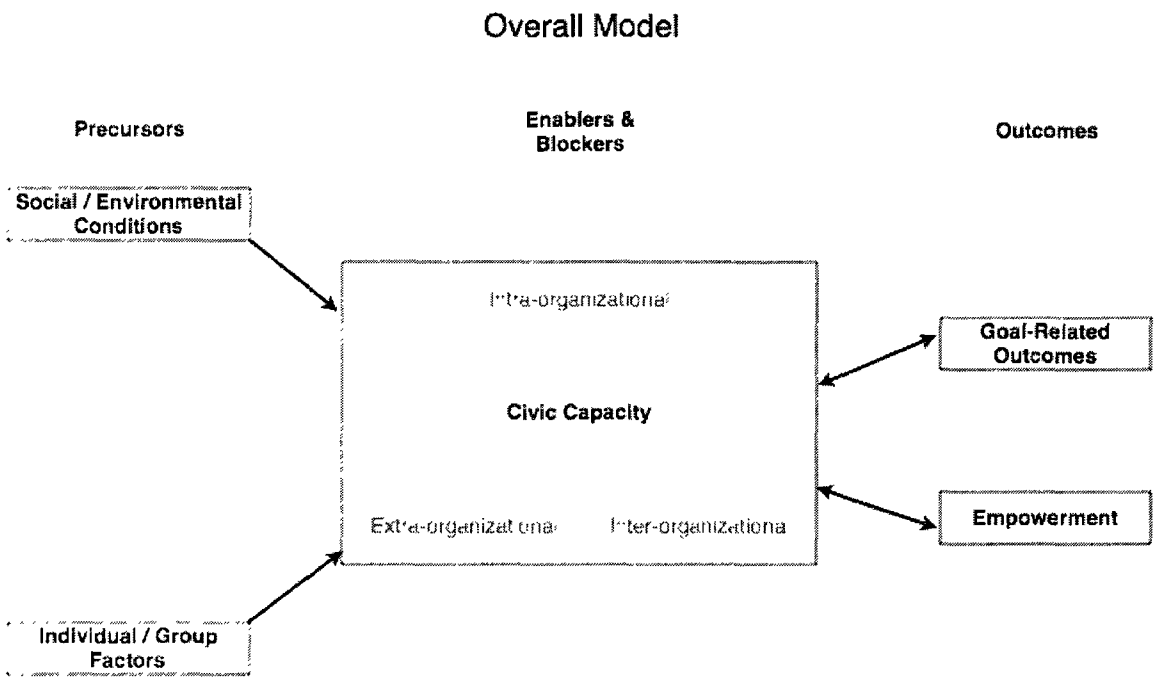
that the potential for neighbourhood associations to effect meaningful change did not always manifest in these visible outcomes.

**Original Research Questions**

Drawing together these separate strands of literature and thought, I developed my thesis-proposal around two research questions. First, I wanted to examine the two neighbourhood associations in terms of the empowerment ideas explained above; were these two groups "just" empowering their members, or were they also empowered as organizational entities? The second question looked at "the conditions and organizational factors that affect neighbourhood associations' capacity for bringing about change", as I worded it in my proposal. In short, I was proposing to look at both the outcomes of the neighbourhood associations' work, and the processes that allowed them to reach those achievements. The general query of what impact neighbourhood associations have and how they do so remained throughout my research, despite the arrival of new insights.

To help answer both original questions, I developed a working framework for my study of neighbourhood associations. Inspired in part by a model of community empowerment developed by Fawcett and colleagues (1995), the framework (in Figure 1) consisted of three main components: precursor components which are largely outside the control of the organization; enabling and blocking factors, representing resources that neighbourhood associations could make use of (including those they access through social connections); and long-term outcomes. The latter component included both tangible improvements in the neighbourhood, as well as the building of organizational capacity and the empowerment of community residents, which would facilitate future efforts.

**Figure 1: Initial Framework**



## Chapter / Variation 2: Methodology

The methodology I initially decided to work from was a case-study perspective. Perhaps I felt, in line with Patton's (2002) recommendations, that viewing a neighbourhood association in its totality would help create a *thick description*; this coherent picture of the organization and its ecological context would be useful for future reporting and application of any research findings.

As I noted earlier, I was focused on the concrete, which tied in well with Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) take on the social sciences, where the specific and concrete (case studies, by definition) are emphasized over the abstract and universal. At the same time, Yin's (1998, 2003) treatises on case-study methodology showed how these approaches could create defendable, rigorous research findings through the use of multiple perspectives and data sources for triangulation.

Although I felt comfortable with this focus on specific cases, I ran into difficulty with writing. I found that the standard academic writing style that I had learned, with its use of the third-person voice, simply did not work for me to present what I had learned. Research literature from fields such as community psychology that utilize different epistemologies take steps towards alternate writing styles, such as through the use of the personal "I" and the inclusion of standpoints, but often continue to conform to orthodox written approaches.

As an alternative, I first started incorporating excerpts from my own written reflections as pieces within my thesis. However, this tactic was not enough. My own words and self spilled over out of the reflections into the body of the work, as you have seen by now in this paper. I later learned that this style of fusing research-oriented writing

with literary style is a growing methodology in the social sciences, referred to as autoethnography[4].

Autoethnography, as a literal reading of the term would suggest, is an outgrowth of ethnography, the traditional anthropological approach of an outside researcher describing a culture: the main differentiating factor is that autoethnographers turn a critical eye at their own culture. The rise of this methodology can be attributed to postcolonial and postmodern critiques of ethnography's separation of researcher and subjects, with the attendant issues of power, privilege, and value imposition (Patton, 2002).

Researchers engaging in autoethnography are insiders, blurring the line between observer and observed. The story of a culture is told through the stories of its members; when the researcher is a member, his or her story becomes part of the research. In Ellis and Bochner (2000)'s words, "autoethnography has become the term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural" (p. 740). With its focus on the self as well as a larger culture, autoethnographic writing often includes literary elements: personal stories, introspective reflections, even poetry and other more creative forms. This aesthetic styling must be balanced with a vigorous qualitative research approach, with the impetus placed on the researcher-writer to present a credible, authentic story that succeeds on both academic and artistic grounds (Richardson, 2000).

How does this thesis benefit from an autoethnographic approach? I take encouragement from Art Bochner's insight on his studies on human communication (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In describing his own journey to using autoethnography, he noted that

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[4] The story of how I discovered this methodology is told in the Coda, starting on page 91.

keeping the traditionally-prescribed distance between researcher and subject was difficult in that field, as everybody (including researchers) engages in some form of communication. Similarly, everybody lives in some form of "community" (however defined) with others; I found that I could not write about the work of these associations and their neighbourhoods, one of which I had lived in, without directly sharing my own experiences and insights on that elusive concept.

**A Timeline of the Journey**

As demonstrated by the timeline (Table 1), my progress in this research project followed an iterative-reflective process.

**Table 1. A Timeline of the Journey**

| Dates | Steps on the Journey |
|---|---|
| Fall 2007 | Preparing the proposal |
| January 2008 | Entry, initial meetings with community contacts |
| February 2008 | Proposal approval from committee |
| April-July 2008 | Interviews |
| July 2008 | Quick analysis primarily to confirm organization theories |
| July 2008 | Brief report to participants |
| Winter 2008-2009 | Reflection on urban stories |
| June-July 2009 | Email to committee, change in focus |
| August 2009 | Additional interviews |
| Fall 2009 | Writing, reflecting, more writing |
| Winter 2009-2010 | Return to data part 1 - basic overview |
| Winter 2009-2010 | Paragraph- or section-level coding |

| | |
|---|---|
| Winter 2009-2010 | More writing and reflecting |
| Spring 2010 | Gathering in more academic literature |
| Spring 2010 | Feedback from key contacts |
| Spring-Summer 2010 | Return to data part 2 - more deliberate review, making "case" |
| Fall 2010 | Thesis defense and final revisions |

Data was initially collected in the spring of 2008, followed by a tentative analysis of the data primarily in line with organizational themes and concepts. These findings were presented to participants in a short report that summer. The following months, over the winter and spring of 2008-2009, proved to be a time for reflection on the neighbourhood associations and their roles. My writings from that time period fall into two camps: questioning the purpose of the research, and reflecting on the character and nature of urban settings.

A synthesis of these two bodies of thought occurred in spring 2009; this "a-ha!" moment prompted me to focus on the urban setting, and the place of neighbourhood associations within it. That August I held a second round of interviews, related to those insights, with my community partners. In Fall 2009, I set myself to fusing data, theory, and reflections through writing; this process also followed an iterative track, with the writing prompting further reflections, which in turn led me to the literature and data to inform the writing. Feedback from my thesis adviser and committee helped ensure a healthy balance between the three sources of inspiration for this text.

Perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of the extended timeline is that I am unable to include the words of my participants in the form of direct quotations. In my ethics applications and consent forms I had set a deadline by which I would be able to

contact participants and request their approval to use specific quotations. As these deadlines passed before I was ready to select quotes for inclusion, I have had to rely on paraphrasing in order to include my participants' voices. This restriction made it difficult to present results in a traditional qualitative manner, but by returning to the transcripts and sharing initial drafts with my community contacts I believe that what I present in this paper is faithful to what I heard in the interviews and focus group. That being said, from this experience I have learned not only of the potential for unexpectedly long journeys, but also to provide room for these delays within ethics forms, such as through assuming a longer timeline or even requesting approval to use quotes without an expiry date, to be able to better honour the voices of participants when the journey to the page is uncertain.

The following sections of this thesis will generally follow this timeline, with the remainder of this variation describing the original research questions and process. The third variation will focus on the influence of urban settings and the development of the second set of interviews. Variation four details the themes observed from both sets of data, while variation five discusses broader ideas and insights.

**Preparing for a Tale of Two Neighbourhood Associations**

To improve the trustworthiness of my work, I felt it would be worthwhile to include a second neighbourhood association in my research to expand the multiple realities and perspectives from which I would be able to hear (Lincoln & Guba, 1986)[5]. This approach would both also provide a defense against the accusation of one neighbourhood association being an exception, as well as suggest avenues for investigation through their differences. Given my volunteering history, I spoke first with

[5] The trustworthiness and authenticity of my research are further discussed in the Intermezzo: A Final Standpoint, after Variation 3.

the executive of Cherry Park, who expressed interest in participating. For the second group, I initially approached the Victoria Park Neighbourhood Association: however, at that time they were not able to participate. A Cherry Park member suggested that I look at another nearby neighbourhood and its association, Cedar Hill.

Speaking with one of their leaders, I was struck by what the members of the Cedar Hill Community Group had done for their neighbourhood and the circumstances through which they had lived. At the same time, I felt that they shared a lot in common with Cherry Park. Both groups worked in dense urban neighbourhoods, shared similar concerns regarding crime and safety, and operated similarly as organizations; these preliminary observations suggested that the two associations would together provide an ideal case.

**Interviews: Ethics, Recruitment, and Procedure**

My thesis committee members approved my proposal in March 2008, with minor revisions and some questions and issues to keep in mind as I conducted my research. In retrospect, my proposal showed a struggle among what I had previously learned to be "proper" science, the realities on the ground that I had seen with the neighbourhood associations, the requirements of the academic world, and my own thoughts and feelings on the subject. Despite my initiation into qualitative methods and alternative epistemologies, I was still partially rooted in the quantitative, deductive, and positivistic approaches that I had learned in my undergraduate studies, no matter how inappropriate they were for my new research-interests. Fortunately, I was using a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed conversations to flow naturally onto different topics and protected me from being confined to my proposal.

Based on the literature outlined earlier, I created a semi-structured guide for both interviews and focus groups (Appendix A). In line with my proposed research questions, the guides focused on past accomplishments of the neighbourhood associations and potential factors that may have helped or hindered the groups in their work. Additional questions probed for multiple levels of impact (individual, groups, neighbourhood, city), the impact of organizational structure, and the resources the association could draw on, including partnerships and collaborations. The final question in the guide asked participants for their vision of their respective neighbourhood association.

After obtaining clearance from the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board, I started my interviews in May 2008. My primary contacts within the groups were the current president of one neighbourhood association and the past president of the other, who both provided feedback on the questionnaires and consent forms. To identify other participants, I utilized snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). I interviewed these two key contacts first; as part of the interview protocol, I asked them (and future participants) to recommend other people who might be interested in participating. Those recommended were contacted by email or phone, using a script approved by the Research Ethics Board.

The interviews took place at a mutually agreed-upon location, which for the majority of participants was their home, office, or private conference-space at their work. One Cedar Hill participant asked to be interviewed at a public food court. Two Cherry Park participants chose to be interviewed at my house in the neighbourhood; in consultation with one of the founding members of the Cherry Park walking group, the focus group of people from this group was also held at my home. Participants were

provided with an information-sheet explaining the research process and asked to read and sign a consent form. I used a digital recorder with the consent of participants, who could withdraw this permission at any time in the interview or focus group. All participants consented to the use of the device. Aside from turning off the recorder in a few interviews when the conversation digressed off-topic, the conversations were recorded in their entirety. I transcribed most of the interviews, with the remainder processed by a paid transcriber in the interest of expediency; this person was cleared by the Research Ethics Board and named on the consent form as having access to the recordings.

**Individuals and Groups Interviewed**

By July I had completed a total of ten interviews (six female, four male) and one focus group. The individuals participating were either members of one of the neighbourhood associations or individuals in the wider community holding relevant positions.

The four interviewees with Cherry Park were all current members of the neighbourhood association: three (two female, one male) were members of the group's executive, while the fourth (male) was a volunteer for one of the association's programs. The one focus group was conducted with the Cherry Park walking group (mixed gender), consisting of individuals who regularly met, talked, and participated together in this ongoing endeavour of the association.

Three members of Cedar Hill were similarly selected and interviewed. Two participants (female) were former leaders who remained connected with the group, and the third participant (male) was a current volunteer.

To provide an alternative perspective, three people (two female, one male) were invited to participate based on their experience working with one or both associations. All three were currently or had been affiliated with municipal or regional government: specifically one current police officer, one former police officer, and a local politician[6].

**Initial Analysis and Report**

These transcripts were the basis of my initial analysis of the data. My process involved looking at general similarities and differences between the two groups, especially in terms of organizational factors, as I read through the transcripts. The scope of focus was broad themes, rather than specific coding, to identify main ideas that I could share with my participants for confirmation and feedback.

In line with my proposal, I drafted an initial report for my participants that included a short explanation of the project, an overview of common themes in terms of similarities and differences between the groups, and recommendations for the two associations (see Appendix B). After incorporating feedback on the draft from my two community contacts, I sent a final version of the initial report by email to all participants. The email invited feedback, but I did not receive any specific suggestions or comments aside from general positive feedback.

A discussion of the themes later derived from this initial data collection can be found in variation four.

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[6] A fourth interview was conducted with a city staff person; however, due to technical difficulties the recording was unusable.

## Intermezzo: A New Road

At this point, the story should have been wrapping up. All I really needed was a more detailed analysis of the findings and some discussion, tied together in standard academic form. However, chance intervened at this point and unexpectedly sent me to Kingston.

*My lifelong interest in geography and mapping leads me to the roadmap metaphor, despite its overuse in the fields of organizational planning and international diplomacy. I took the path that most others were taking, or did I? My initial choice of focus took me into (personally) unknown areas. I wasn't giving out quantitative surveys or counting members or evaluating the outcome of some program, all of which would have provided a clear multi-lane highway to my destination. Limited-access, as these roads are known, are difficult to enter and even more difficult to leave mid-trip.*

*Perhaps my assumption was that I could treat my journey thus, that the highway I was on would continue to run straight and true to the end. I had learned that qualitative research was an iterative process, that questions and focus could change. Although acknowledging the possibility, I didn't foresee major disruptions, only short detours and side trips that would have no long-term ramifications on myself or the research. And maybe, had my life at the time allowed me to finish the drive in daylight hours, I would have finished more or less as planned, with a complete (if not terribly interesting) final paper that would let me check the final box and collect my degree, never to darken academia's halls again. Instead, I was caught in the open during a long night.*

*A true map is not the same as a list of directions. It does not assume where you are coming from, or where you want to go. However, you do need to know your current location for it to be of any use. At the time, I did not know where I was. I struck out in several directions, hoping that one of them would prove an easy road, but my doubts soon halted my progress. I wonder now if the uncertainty was in my own abilities and knowledge or with my original destination* (personal reflection, from October 3, 2009).

## Chapter / Variation 3: Neighbourhoods and Place

"What conversation are you joining?" It was that question, posed to another student, which helped me find a new path to take in my thesis. The change in my personal circumstances initially prevented me from working on this project, but even after the pieces began to settle, I found it difficult to move forward with what I had. One of the critiques of my proposal came back: what would this study accomplish? As mentioned above, many organizational studies of neighbourhood associations had already been conducted in previous decades. Was the context so much different now? Even with considering the relevancy of these groups, at the time I still felt like my work on this project was not adding anything new to what had been done before.

My answer to the above question is articulated in the email to my committee below: it can be reduced simply to "an urban conversation".

> *I had grown up in the suburbs of a large city (Winnipeg), and spent six years after graduating from high school living in Canada's largest urban centre. Those experiences in Toronto proved formative for my personal and professional interests -- the variety of people, the clash of different interests, the presence of the very powerful and the disempowered. There, I learned that the city is a complex creature, filled with actors, processes, and structures that could influence thousands or millions of people far beyond their immediate spheres of control. When I applied for graduate studies in community psychology at Laurier, I attributed my participation in volunteer associations on and off campus as a prime motivator for leaving the traditional academic psychology route behind; those experiences working with people and having an impact outside the*

> *classroom led me to an applied field. Thinking back now, I wonder if the influence of the city in all of its messy, seemingly chaotic nature helped me to realize that mainstream psychology with its focus on a handful of variables at a time was too narrow in scope, and that I needed a field with a broader, more integrative perspective* (personal communication to committee, July 2, 2009).

It was only towards the end of my time in Toronto that I recognized my interest in urban issues, starting as an outgrowth of a fascination with public transportation. Moving to Kitchener and later Kingston, Carolyn and I purposefully chose urban neighbourhoods to live in, partially because we wanted to live in a setting where it was feasible to walk, cycle, and use public transportation to get around. We also agreed that a suburban lifestyle was not for us, even if it was perhaps a bit more quiet and predictable. Personally, it felt somewhat odd for a community psychologist to live in a setting that was not amenable to community.

Even now, I find it difficult to articulate what draws me to cities. I can list the reasons, the environmental and social benefits, but I wonder if those are just rationalizations. Kingston, with a population of over one hundred thousand people, could be considered an average-sized city, particularly in the Canadian context. Its unofficial status as a regional centre in Eastern Ontario, along with the presence of cultural amenities and a major university, promote some aspects of urban living that may not be found in other cities of similar size. I live close to downtown in an older neighbourhood that is accessible to transit and an easy walking-distance to parks and shops. I enjoy exploring the city and its neighbourhoods, and seeing what they have to offer; even so, I

feel there is something missing here, some essence that I found in larger urban areas such as Ottawa, Toronto, and Kitchener.

**Community Psychology and Urban Communities**

This reflection also suggests that my understanding and appreciation of the urban character helped propel me to community psychology. Cities are not amenable to the experimental methods of traditional psychology that work with a limited number of variables. Likewise, the traditional research-focus on individuals struck me as untenable, especially when that person is situated in a context with thousands or millions others, interacting in myriad ways that create both direct and indirect effects.

At the same time, I believe that the goals and values of community psychology helped to sharpen my focus on cities. For community psychologists, one simple reason to develop an interest in and understanding of cities is because that is where the majority of people, communities, volunteer groups, and non-profits organizations are[7]. The last Statistics Canada census in 2006 recorded more than 25 million city-dwellers in this nation, representing 80% of the population - almost a complete reversal from the situation at the time of the country's founding (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). Canada was an urban-majority country by 1941; the world as a whole did not reach this milestone until 2008 (UNFPA, 2007).

Beyond these numbers, cities provide opportunities that support many of the aims of community psychology, including the pursuit of well-being and liberation. Cities have the greater numbers and densities that are more likely to support specialized social services and cultural amenities that would not be sustainable in smaller towns. Somewhat

[7] Of course, there are people and communities in rural settings as well, and a number of community psychologists are interested in issues related to rural living.

contrary to the stereotype of the polluted city, urban areas can produce environmental benefits through energy efficiency that is a byproduct of density: smaller housing requires less energy to heat and cool than a larger space, and feasible transportation based on non-car alternatives such as walking, cycling, and public transit reduces air pollution, energy consumption and carbon emissions. The promotion of city living, as opposed to new low-density development on urban fringes, can accommodate population growth while protecting agricultural land and natural wilderness.

Cities can also bring economic benefits. Richard Florida's (2002) "Creative Economy" theory posits that developed countries are shifting away from manufacturing- and service-oriented work towards an emphasis on occupations that cultivate and develop ideas. Through their mix of culture, services, and diversity, cities are well placed to take advantage of this economic shift by attracting and retaining professionals in the creative class.

Some governments are beginning to encourage urbanization for these economic and environmental benefits. In Ontario, the provincial government introduced the "Places to Grow" planning strategy in order to prepare for an anticipated provincial population growth of four million (Ontario Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, n.d.). The main thrust of the plan is to increase density in currently built areas, rather than continuing the trend of sprawling out. The municipal government in Kitchener is taking a parallel approach, working to attract businesses, institutions, and people back to its downtown core.

Although I generally see these movements as positive, I take to heart Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) prescription for the social sciences, advising researchers to ask who

benefits (and who does not) from change. Living in Toronto, I was aware that the urban environment did not help all equally, that some parts of town received the label of "bad areas" and were viewed as unsafe, and that rapid re-development of core areas, known as "gentrification", was pushing away long-time, low-income residents through increases to rent and other living costs. Community psychology's focus on liberation and social justice helped put my urban interests into perspective, leading me to think about the price of city living and how these settings could become supportive for all of its residents.

Several studies that I studied in 2007 highlighted the issue of urban inequality. A symposium at the 2007 Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA) conference told the story of a Chicago housing project's redevelopment into a mixed-income complex (Malinowski, 2007). Although there was a need for physical renewal of the housing, residents of that project faced negative outcomes as a result of the change. Many were uprooted and sent to far corners of the urban area away from existing supports and social networks. Those who could stay near their former homes found a changing landscape. With the decreasing client-base, some social services reduced programming or moved away entirely, and some local recreational centres, anticipating an increase in middle-income families, started charging for programs that were previously free. Residents also faced price-increases in goods and services from local stores. Although the net impact of the change on the neighbourhood may have been positive, it appeared that residents did not all share in this new prosperity.

Canadian cities also demonstrate inequality. A 2007 study by researchers at the University of Toronto found that, based on changing income levels, Toronto was really three cities: a core area where average incomes increased by more than 20% since 1970, a

growing periphery where incomes decreased by more than 20% in the same interval, and in between, stable middle-class neighbourhoods increasingly squeezed on both sides (Hulchanski, 2007). Contrary to the patterns seen in many American cities, Toronto's "first city" was concentrated around downtown, while the "third city" marked by declining income was found primarily in its "inner suburbs."

Another Toronto study found definite health benefits and costs associated with this uneven geography. Controlling for common social determinants of health, the prevalence of diabetes was higher in impoverished periphery areas, compared to rates in low-income downtown neighbourhoods. The study authors attributed this discrepancy to differences in the urban environment; the suburban area lacked accessible healthy food providers and medical facilities, and its infrastructure prioritized car-use over healthier alternatives such as walking or cycling (Glazier & Booth, 2007).

Geographic differences within cities can also exacerbate gender inequality. Women in low-income households are more likely to also suffer from "time poverty" due to the multiple demands placed on them and the difficulty of filling these demands as the result of poor public transportation and the wide dispersion of amenities, stores, and services (Turner & Grieco, 2000). This dispersion was formed by a post-war urban planning model that split cities into function zones (i.e. residential, commercial, industrial), based on a gender-based division of work with a male breadwinner and a female housekeeper (Beall, 1996). While this nuclear-family ideal may be in decline, its physical legacy remains.

Inequality is also visible across cities. For example, American "Rust Belt" cities that were dependent on manufacturing now see high unemployment rates and declining

populations. Services are cut back in response to lower tax-revenue; some cities, such as Detroit, are even taking steps to shrink their urban areas by buying up and demolishing derelict housing to reduce costs in service delivery (Florida, 2010). Urban economist Richard Florida (2002) predicts that, despite the promise of globalization and modern communication technology to "flatten" the world and allow places to become irrelevant to the economy, we will continue to see spikes of wealth across the globe in some cities, and valleys of poverty everywhere else.

In addition to fueling a personal imperative to improve our cities, community psychology as a field gave me the space to explore urban issues. The acceptance of perspectives from other disciplines such as geography along with sources that mainstream psychology would eschew for being "non-academic" provided me with a breadth of knowledge and insight that has served me well throughout this project. The use of the ecological framework also allowed me to investigate the different levels of individual and community, and how they interacted.

**Where It All Comes Together: Urban Neighbourhood Associations**

Cherry Park and Cedar Hill are essentially urban neighbourhoods. Given their location on opposite ends of Kitchener's downtown (to the west and east[8], respectively), this may not be a surprising statement; however, it took me some time to realize that this characteristic would impact my understanding of the neighbourhood associations.

In terms of physical characteristics, both neighbourhoods are old and dense; one only need walk through them to realize this fact. Population density per square kilometer in Cedar Hill and Cherry Park is almost half again that of the city of Kitchener, and more

[8] Kitchener's street layout is generally not aligned with any cardinal direction, so any reference in this paper to a direction should be taken as approximate.

than four to five times that of the Kitchener Census Metropolitan Area (CMA)[9] as a whole[10]. Both neighbourhoods have a greater percentage of housing built before 1986 compared to Kitchener as a whole and Ontario. The percentage of rental housing in both Cedar Hill and Cherry Park are almost twice the rates for the city and province.

The populations of both areas also differ from the rest of the city on several demographics. The percentage of residents who immigrated to Canada is greater than Kitchener's already-high rate. Likewise, compared to Kitchener as a whole, relatively more people in these two neighbourhoods reported a mother tongue that is neither English nor French, spoke a non-official language at home, and identified as a visible minority. Residents in both communities are more likely to walk, cycle, or use public transportation to commute to work. Less positively, unemployment rates are higher, median income is lower, and residents are less likely to have a post-secondary education compared to the city at large[11].

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[9] As defined by Statistics Canada, "A census metropolitan area (CMA) is an area with a population of at least 100,000, including an urban core with a population of at least 50,000" (p.12, Statistics Canada, 2008). The Kitchener CMA also includes Waterloo and Cambridge.

[10] Neighbourhood and demographic information presented in this and following paragraphs is based on the 2006 Census (Statistics Canada, 2007). Comparing the two neighbourhoods based on this information is somewhat difficult, due to differences between the boundaries of the neighbourhood and the official census tract definitions, with both neighbourhood associations spanning two census tracts. For the information presented, I used census tract 5410011.00 for Cedar Hill, which incorporates the majority of the neighbourhood along with a bordering neighbourhood, and census tract 5410018.00 for Cherry Park, which covers the southern portion of the neighbourhood, where the majority of neighbourhood events took place and active members in the association lived. Despite the limitations of this data set, I believe they provide important context.

[11] This latter statistic may change in light of both Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Waterloo opening new campuses in downtown Kitchener, which may attract both students and faculty to live in the area.

**Ecology of Urban Settings**

The ecological framework is a cornerstone of community psychology and commonly used to position individuals or groups within their setting. As defined in the developmental research work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), ecological theory situates the individual within multiple nested levels of influence ranging from micro-level effects from family and close friends, meso-level groups such as classrooms and schools, and broader macro systems such as societal beliefs on the nature and purpose of education. In line with this framework, my question-guides included probes for all the levels, asking about the impact of association activities on individual, groups of people, the community, and the city as a whole. In the interviews, participants mentioned the potential for effect at each of these levels, including for individuals attending their programs or events, for groups (formal and informal) such as youth who were able to gather and interact, for the community through greater safety, and for wider city issues.

Additional components of the ecological theory are of strong relevance to cities. For example, adaptation to change and the cycling of resources occurs in the creative reuse of old buildings: large houses, unused warehouses and abandoned factories may find new life as apartments, offices, or creative spaces. The potential impact of ecological diversity becomes apparent when one looks at housing. In contrast to many suburban areas with houses of similar size and age primarily designed for families with children, an older neighbourhood often has buildings of varying sizes. Jane Jacobs (1961) noted that this element can serve to bring a diverse range of people to a neighbourhood, and more importantly keep them there. When a resident's life circumstances change, they can find

appropriate options in the area instead of searching outside of it, thereby maintaining continuity in an area.

Some urban theorists make explicit comparisons between this human-built environment and natural settings. Jane Jacobs referred to ecological biology when she characterized cities as examples of organized complexity that involve too many factors to allow for simple cause-and-effect models to be useful, while the complex interaction of such factors precludes the use of standard probabilistic models. Similar to a natural space, making a simple change may have unintended consequences. Curtailing a predator may severely affect the overall health of the entire ecology, while creating new public space in a city could paradoxically have a negative effect on socializing, if the addition disrupts existing patterns.

Another urban thinker, Jeb Brugmann (2009), suggests that cities should be regarded as a separate type of ecology; just as grasslands, forests, and desserts across the world share certain properties, so do large cities, despite cultural and political differences. Urban animals show behavioural adaptations, such as birds changing the frequency of their mating calls and raccoons living in greater densities. Brugmann also cites changes in human city-dwellers; for example, women in American, Russian, and Sudanese cities are more likely than their rural counterparts to emphasize education when looking for mates.

Cities provide certain structural advantages, which Brugmann (2009) views in economical terms but can also be applied to social movements. City-densities reduce logistical costs and thus improve the efficiency of actions; likewise, large cities provide space for initially small programs to scale up. These two structural components facilitate connections between people and organizations within cities, while urban infrastructure

and access to resources allows for change to spread to other regions and urban areas. Brugmann cites these advantages as contributing factors towards the internationalization of businesses, the spread of certain criminal street gangs across the globe, the development of city-based environmental movements, and the success of revolutions in Iran and Eastern Europe. Across these theorists, a common idea emerges: the ecological impact is on both individuals and their community, suggesting influences on the neighbourhood associations that bridge them as well.

**Additional Questions, Additional Interviews**

In light of this new understanding of the urban context of the neighbourhood associations, I felt it would be important to go back to my participants and ask questions about the urban context specifically. I created a new semi-structured interview guide (Appendix C) with questions on the role of the neighbourhood association in its community and Kitchener, and the impact of neighbourhood characteristics on the activities of the association. This supplementary interview series was approved by the Research Ethics Board in the spring of 2009.

I chose to re-interview the two key contacts for the associations to examine the interdependence between the neighbourhood and the group; given their positions of leadership, I felt that they would have insight into their associations, the community context, and citywide trends influencing their groups. Interviews were arranged by phone and email, and took place at the home of one participant and the office of the other. Aside from the change in questions, these interviews were conducted in a similar fashion to the initial ones, including my recording of the conversations and subsequent transcription.

In speaking with my two key contacts, I was looking primarily for confirmation of my idea that the urban setting influenced the work of the neighbourhood association. Both participants did speak to the influences of the urban context on their associations' activities, and likewise what impact the setting had on their communities: their insights about their urban setting along with those of other participants are provided in variation four, below.

## Chapter / Variation 4: Findings

If I take one methodological lesson away from this research experience, it will be that qualitative research is neither a linear nor a uniform path. I cannot say that I was not forewarned, but knowledge and experience can be two very different creatures. I knew that insights from the data and my own experiences might take me to unanticipated destinations, and that I might need to re-cover old ground as I went through the process of writing; even so, I was surprised by the twists and turns of my journey.

I began with specific questions related to the organizational characteristics of the neighbourhood associations, namely the degree to which these two groups were empowered organizations and the conditions and organizational factors that affected their ability to bring about change. Later, I also sought to examine the influence of the urban setting in which these groups acted and existed. Throughout, my overarching question for this research has focused on what impact do neighbourhood associations have and how they have made a difference. I re-analyzed both sets of data with these broader questions in mind.

Data collected through talking with participants, the methods for which were described in the previous two variations, formed the basis for my writing. Ideas from the body of research literature and my own observations and reflections guided interpretations, but throughout the process I have returned to the data to point me to new directions and provide confirmation for new ideas.

The preceding sections have only hinted at some of the definitive observations, meshed together with ideas from the body of research literature and my own observations

and reflections. Here, I will present some common themes, with paraphrased information from the interviews and focus group to support my findings[12].

I arrived at these themes by first reviewing my interview transcripts and notes to create one-line summaries of noteworthy sentences, paragraphs or sections. These brief sentences were then entered into Tinderbox Version 5.5 (Bernstein, 2010), a Mac-based outlining/mapping program, and grouped together by similarity within each participant. After reviewing these key phrases, I created a basic coding system with initial themes, which was later refined through iterative reviewing of data and codes into five themes and eight sub-themes (represented in Table 2). The results for both associations are presented together below, with key differences between the two groups noted with the relevant themes and sub-themes.

**Table 2. Themes and Sub-themes**

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| Organizational Characteristics | Structure |
| | Partnerships |
| | Burnout |
| | Leadership |
| Safety | Response to Crime |
| | Police |
| Residents | Sense of Ownership |
| | Informal Connections |
| Focus | |
| Learning | |

[12] As discussed earlier on pages 34 and 35, it was not possible to include direct quotations from participants because of timeline restrictions in the ethics procedures.

## Organizational Characteristics

**Structure**. Cherry Park and Cedar Hill shared a number of similarities as volunteer-run organizations. Structurally, both possessed characteristics of empowering organizations. Although both organizations had an organized executive to provide leadership and direction, the structures for both are relatively flat with few barriers to entry. A Cherry Park participant recalled how his involvement with the group began as a member of the walking group, but "evolved" into an executive position after helping plan a special event. Members of both groups brought their unique strengths, interests, and experiences to the organizations.

The small size of the groups simplified communication and decision-making processes. Members could easily propose and initiate new events or programs as long as they were willing to commit to it themselves: one participant mentioned an idea that he considered proposing, knowing that the executive would tell him to go ahead and lead it. Together, these traits provided a degree of flexibility to responding to changing circumstances and new challenges, especially compared to a traditional bureaucracy.

**Partnerships**. Both groups sought resources through partnerships with other organizations. The municipal government, including staff and the local councilor, provided assistance in the form of grants and links to other groups and initiatives. Cedar Hill worked with the Kitchener Downtown Business Association on common concerns related to downtown quality of life, while Cherry Park connected with local businesses in their area for event sponsorship. Cherry Park also built links with local schools and churches for meeting and programming space. Cedar Hill, as a member of the Downtown Neighbourhood Alliance, had access to space at the Downtown Community Centre, and

maintained links to another nearby neighbourhood association that provided recreational and social programming.

Within these partnerships the neighbourhood associations were active participants, rather than passive recipients. As one Cherry Park participant noted, their neighbourhood association was likely developing a reputation for pushing the municipal governments for resources, rather than waiting for such supports; the participant joked that their forward approach may be causing some councilors to start cursing the association's name. A Cedar Hill participant spoke to the association's approach to collaboration which focused on how both sides can contribute, instead of relying on the external organization as the main source of power and knowledge.

The associations were also able to assist other neighbourhood associations, primarily by sharing their experiences and providing inspiration and encouragement. One Cedar Hill participant reported presenting the story of the neighbourhood to groups across Ontario as an example of residents and police working together to improve safety. I personally experienced one example of external impact when a friend of mine, a student at Laurier's School of Social Work, contacted me to talk about Cherry Park. As part of her work with a different neighbourhood association in Kitchener, a contact with the municipal government had provided her with the survey I had created during my summer work with Cherry Park, as a local successful practice for other associations to emulate.

**Burnout**. The loss of volunteer members through overwork or "burnout" was a common concern for both groups. Given their small size and reliance on volunteers, the loss of even a few dedicated individuals could have serious ramifications for the group's ability to function. Burnout was a particular concern for the participants from Cherry

Park: one participant specifically mentioned the history of past neighbourhood associations in the area (King-Belmont Neighbourhood Association and KW Hospital Neighbourhood Association) that had followed a similar trajectory of rapid formation and running of activities, followed by burnout of members and dissolution.

In response to the threat of burnout, the associations engaged in some protective activities. Participants mentioned some basic volunteer management techniques, such as promoting the organization broadly to increase volunteer recruitment, lowering the barriers for volunteer participation (such as making it easier for parents to volunteer with their children), and improving how they ran events and activities so that fewer people were needed to help out. A Cedar Hill participant noted that a lack of tangible resources, such as money, prevented the association from over-extending itself. Both groups at times made use of a simple solution: letting go of activities that were no longer needed or that no longer had a "champion" in the organization.

Finally, both organizations sought some degree of permanence so that the associations were not dependent on the ongoing efforts of current members. In Cherry Park, several participants noted their hope of obtaining space for a community centre to provide stability and raise the visibility of their association in the neighbourhood. Cedar Hill successfully obtained funding for a part-time staff person to act as the coordinator for the Downtown East program; at the time of the interviews, a former association president was fulfilling this role. This position allowed her to spend more time focusing on community issues and connecting with other organizations than she could as a volunteer.

**Leadership.** The role of leadership was a frequent theme among participants. The current president of Cherry Park and the former president of Cedar Hill (now acting as

the staff person mentioned earlier) were seen as instrumental people for the formation and ongoing efforts of their respective groups. Participants commented on their perseverance and ability to make and sustain contacts with other community organizations, businesses, and government officials. Tied in to the appreciation of the work done by the association leadership was a fear of them leaving due to burnout or for other reasons.

One interesting finding was the involvement of women in positions of leadership of both organizations. Both of my community contacts were women, one of whom commented on the key roles that female residents played during the group's formation and early work.

**Safety**

**Response to Crime.** Nearly every participant commented on safety and crime issues in their respective communities. Participants reported significant issues around illicit drug use and dealing, property damage, gangs (particularly in Cherry Park), and prostitution (in Cedar Hill). Critical incidences prompted action in both neighbourhoods: in Cherry Park, a resident's shed was broken into, leading residents to contact their local city councilor over this and other incidents in the neighbourhood. A Cedar Hill resident recalled an evening where the neighbourhood was full of cars and people related to the drug trade, which was a pivotal moment that encouraged her and others to become involved.

The two neighbourhood associations had their genesis in resident groups formed in response to these conditions. In Cedar Hill, members initially observed activity from their property and reported it to the police. Later, in 1989, the group organized with the

assistance of the police to patrol the neighbourhood through a "Citizens On Patrol" program, an approach that had been rejected previously due to fear of reprisals from criminals in the area. Cherry Park's response began with a resident meeting with the police and city staff, at which point a police officer suggested forming a nightly walking group. These groups walked through their respective neighbourhoods in the evening and reported suspicious activities to the police.

**Police.** A key community partner that participants from both organizations cited frequently was the Waterloo Regional Police Service. In Cherry Park, a police community-mobilization officer played a key role during the formation of the group by chairing initial community meetings, providing updates to the group, and supporting initiatives such as the walking group and the cleanup BBQ. In Cedar Hill, one resident went directly to the local police commander to forge a relationship to address issues in the community. As a result, a five-officer platoon of officers was assigned to work directly with the association. Members of both associations spoke positively about police involvement, particularly their willingness to see the community groups as partners in ongoing safety efforts. Although the police were not as heavily involved with either group at the time of interviewing, representatives continued to attend association meetings to provide updates and learn about new concerns.

### Residents

**Sense of Ownership.** Participants, including those who were external to the organizations, talked about the growing enthusiasm that residents showed for their neighbourhood. Members of both associations were described as passionate and proud to live in their respective neighbourhoods; participants not living in the neighbourhood but

involved in professional capacities in the city or region also commented on how residents developed a sense of community ownership through their involvement. One Cherry Park participant told the story of a gentleman who took part in a neighbourhood cleanup: his rationale, beyond tidying up the community, was to set a good example for his grandchildren and teach them to care about where they lived.

In Cedar Hill, neighbourhood pride contrasted with the stigma associated with their neighbourhood's reputation. One participant related the experience of talking with someone about the neighbourhood; when the conversation partner made a comment about "those people" in Cedar Hill, the participant had to point out that she was one of "those people." Other participants spoke more generally about negative comments and generalizations by residents of other neighbourhoods and local media.

**Informal Connections.** As noted earlier in this paper, participants began forging informal connections with their neighbours, including casual conversations and smiling or saying hello to strangers. One person even suggested that the primary purpose of any neighbourhood association is to foster such links.

**Focus**

Within both groups, participants mentioned a major initiative taking place in their organization: youth programs for Cherry Park and housing advocacy for Cedar Hill. Although the specific activities differ, they both demonstrate a broader focus and understanding of forces at play in their communities.

At the time of the interviews, Cherry Park was completing a season of running a weekly youth drop-in program at a local elementary school. This evening program was open to school-age youth (not including high school students), and consisted of games in

the gymnasium as well as crafts and arts in the main foyer. Each session would have two to four volunteers from the community, along with some volunteers from high schools or Wilfrid Laurier University. During my time with the association, I helped out at one of these drop-in nights; we quickly reached our capacity of thirty youth and had to start turning them away, while those inside were definitely having fun.

Later, the importance of the youth program to the association came out clearly. Several interview participants noted the impact of the drop-in on individual youth; for example, a volunteer told the story of one kid who was very shy initially, but after being brought to the event a couple times by his mother, eagerly joined in the activities. Another participant who frequently helped out at the drop-in mentioned how, when the program first started, the children would often ignore the adults, but a couple of months later would pay attention (usually) when the volunteers had something to say.

Participants also spoke of the potential broader impact of this program. After telling the story of the youth listening to the adults, the participant expressed his hope that the drop-in would help build trust between youth and adults, a trust that would extend to interactions in the neighbourhood. Sharing similar thoughts, a third participant noted how the connections built among the youth from the drop-in could make the community safer, as youth may be more likely to intervene in a situation such as somebody being picked on if they recognized and knew the victim.

Reflecting the challenges they faced in their neighbourhood, Cedar Hill participants talked about advocacy work they had done with landlords and the municipal government. One participant invoked the "broken windows" theory, where an unclean or unsafe area in one part of the neighbourhood could spread to other areas, as a reason to

focus on property standards and what landlords were (or were not) doing to maintain their properties. When possible, the group worked with local landlords to address concerns; when that tactic did not succeed with some landlords, especially absentee owners, the group would call in municipal bylaw enforcement officers. Beyond pressing for enforcement of existing standards, Cedar Hill advocated for changes to existing property bylaws to limit the development of duplexes and triplexes in the neighbourhood.

**Learning**

Participants also noted the importance of learning, both organizationally and personally. Notwithstanding the observation earlier regarding the range of skills and interests demonstrated by association members, neither Cherry Park nor Cedar Hill had active volunteers with experience in community development. As a result, both organizations had to learn "on the fly;" one participant, external to the two groups, noted the need for continual learning as service agencies, city policies, and the neighbourhoods themselves always change. Although there was a learning curve, the flexibility of the organizations allowed for this kind of learning. One long-standing Cedar Hill participant recalled how the group seemed to have an "intuitive" grasp of the issues facing their neighbourhood and the need to understand the different players and processes at work in their community. This perspective was echoed by a Cherry Park member, who suggested that his group needed to learn more about the different people living in his area.

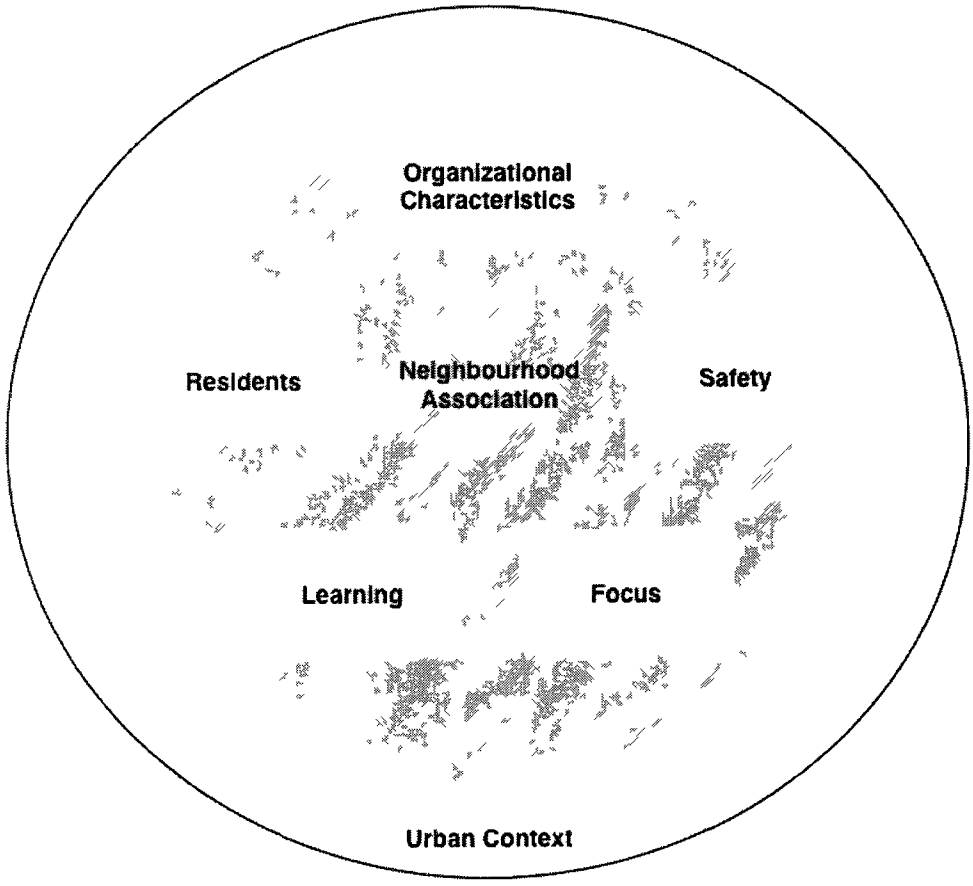
Personal learning revolved around the concepts of community. One Cherry Park participant recalled how he learned about Muslim dietary requirements through a family who came to the association's cleanup BBQ event. Two Cedar Hill participants separately used the analogy of "it takes a village to raise a child" to illustrate that a

community is made up of everybody in the area and that every resident can have an impact on their neighbourhood. Participants generally recognized that there was a wide range of people lived in their neighbourhoods; however, they also reported that this diversity was not always present in their respective associations.

**A Reflection on the Themes**

These five themes, encompassing the voices of participants from both sets of interviews, provide insight into their past experiences, present understandings, and future hopes and expectations for their associations and their communities. Within each theme, some of the participants' experiences conveyed a connection to their urban context and place. For instance, organizational characteristics and focus were shaped by local spaces, while safety issues were tied to neighbourhood areas that they, as residents, cared for. Likewise, learning about their communities and the processes that affect them was a key outcome for both groups. Figure 2 illustrates this embedded nature of these key themes, based on participants' experiences, within neighbourhood associations and their larger urban context. The five experiential themes are situated within, emerge from, and shape each neighbourhood association. The larger urban context appears to not only provide a backdrop but also an environment that surrounds and impacts the participants' experiences and their neighbourhood associations.

**Figure 2. Themes arising from the data.**




As mixed-use neighbourhoods, the presence of businesses, schools, faith groups, and social services within or near the neighbourhoods influenced the work of the community groups (for better or worse). Sometimes the presence of these other actors was positive, as in the case of Cherry Park accessing space at local churches and schools or Cedar Hill working with the local business association. Interactions could also be less productive, as the case of friction between Cedar Hill and some landlords and local services that they felt were not contributing to the ongoing security and stability of the area.

Participants also directly recognized the impact of the neighbourhood associations' urban setting. Each neighbourhood is unique and so are their neighbourhood associations, one participant commented; another, based on her experiences working with other neighbourhood associations, noted that the downtown groups had a different reputation and "flavour" compared to suburban associations.

Returning to the second set of interviews on the role of the neighbourhood associations in the community, the two participants spoke of interactions with other organizations such as the police, municipal government, and local services. In these interviews, discussion of these partnerships went beyond simple collaboration to focus on a deeper sense of connection and inclusion. One participant brought up the analogy of a puzzle, where the neighbourhood association was one piece, not the central piece or even a large piece, but a piece nonetheless, without which the puzzle would not be complete. The other participant spoke of the need for an inclusive approach when working with other stakeholders. Rather than focusing on individual needs and responsibilities, the focus was on what "we" (meaning all those at the table) could contribute.

Cities are filled with multiple stakeholders, including governments, community services, businesses, schools, hospitals and non-profit groups. Neighbourhood associations are one of the few (and often the only) groups that bring the perspective of the local residents to the table, thereby linking individuals and their communities. In their critical evaluation of community, DeFilippis et al. (2006) point out that neighbourhoods are connected to many different realms: "It is also the site not only of where life is lived but of critical social, political, economic and cultural institutions and relationships." (p. 685).

These community groups do benefit from reaching out to other organizations, often those with resources, but it need not be a one-way relationship. Neighbourhood associations bring not just local knowledge to the table, but by virtue of being invited to multiple tables, they can serve as conduits between these external organizations. Even if neighbourhood associations are not the central piece, they are a part of the puzzle.

## Intermezzo: Perspectives and Locations

I started this thesis with a focus on organizational practices and outcomes, which suggested the case approach with multiple sources of data and an observational stance (the latter more appropriately labeled as participant-observation, given my prior involvement with neighbourhood associations, Cherry Park in particular). Over time, my interest led me towards an ecological-experiential frame, with less emphasis on the organization and more on both the individuals (including myself) who constitute them, and the settings in which they find themselves in. As a result, I found my role as researcher shifting away from a passive collector of data to a fully-integrated actor. My words and stories found space alongside those of my participants, their groups, and their neighbourhoods. This blending brings up a question of confidence: how can I be sure that what I am presenting is accurate?

My time in this half-exile had a curious impact on my position in relation to the neighbourhood associations. On the one hand, there was a definite separation because of the geographical distance. I no longer lived in Kitchener, so visiting either neighbourhood involved a journey of hours rather than minutes. One could argue that, after distributing the initial "summary of the findings" report to my participants as promised in the consent form, I no longer had any obligations to either community. The reality was different, though; I felt that I needed to dig deeper, that I owed it to both groups to take a broader look at where they fit.

"You got too close." Four words from one of my community contacts when I met her for the second round of interviews. They were not pronounced as a question or an accusation, but simple fact: this topic of neighbourhood associations caught me in some

way, and I could not leave it with a simplistic depiction. Does this revelation mean that I am compromised in some way, constrained to presenting a certain view? I argue that these groups are still relevant and useful in today's urban context, and although I acknowledge the potential downsides of community groups, maybe I dismiss these criticisms a bit too easily: it does not help that I am generally inclined to a positive viewpoint, with the belief that "building" (in whatever form that takes) towards a better future is very much possible.

Sure, I would not want to disappoint or anger these two groups or my community contacts, but if they engaged in practices or took stances which I fundamentally disagreed with, I would not have remained involved with them in the first place. Instead, I have seen in both groups an ability to look more broadly and to question, and which in turn caused me to question my own assumptions. For example, as I recounted earlier in the history of my involvement with Cherry Park, I was initially uncertain about their strong beginning focus on crime; likewise, the conflict between Cedar Hill and some local services gave me reason to think. Coming from a middle-class suburban background, I did not fully realize the potential chilling effect that crime can have on a community (Saegert & Winkel, 2004). I never had reason to ask what actions neighbourhood residents might need to engage in to create a safe, livable neighbourhood.

Although I may not have expected their response and some may criticize their narrow focus, it is an outsider's perspective. I am not entirely sure I know enough of their history to critique their decisions and actions. Perhaps, like some suggest, being a true critical friend (Evans, 2008) requires raising questions and reflecting back the potential negative implications. I am not sure I have been a critical friend in my discussions with

each group, but I hope my recommendations in the Finale section allow for some reflection to support their growth. Even those comments are not particularly critical; perhaps I am not suited to being a critical friend, or perhaps the distance (physical and psychological) has grown too great for me to fill that role.

Another possibility is that I do not yet know what critical questions to ask. One of my fears for any urban development or re-development project is the spectre of gentrification, where a diverse community grows rapidly in value so as to displace that vibrancy and vitality that attracted the new affluent residents in the first place. I am aware that any neighbourhood I work with, professionally or as a resident, carries the potential of becoming either livable and welcoming, or sterile and exclusionary. I hope that Cherry Park and Cedar Hill continue towards the former, but I do not know how to best support them and similar communities in their endeavors: perhaps through encouraging and supporting the questioning and learning that these two groups already do.

My resulting themes are descriptive of what these neighbourhood associations have done and how they operate, based on the perspectives of members and other individuals connected to these groups. The challenges they faced are given voice, as are their successes. I also have included my perspective and my voice regarding the process, describing both my experiences in Kitchener and more recently my time living in a Kingston neighbourhood that lacks such a group. The neighbourhood that Carolyn and I chose to live in Kingston, officially referred to as Williamsville, shares certain similarities with Cedar Hill and Cherry Park: old housing (our residence dates to the turn of the 20th century), proximity to downtown, and problems with decay and crime in the recent past that is still ongoing to some degree. On our block, we have discovered a

diversity of people: renters, owners, professionals, labourers, students, families, couples, single people, young, and old.

It took almost two years for us to reach this point, where we know several people and families well enough to have chats on the sidewalk and even invite them into our home to share a meal. If there was a neighbourhood association in our area, would this time have been reduced? I had few friends in Kingston during these first two years, which made the loss of the local, street-level community that I had discovered in Kitchener even more acutely felt for me. Looking back, this experience served as an informal null condition, showing that although community-building can and does happen in the absence of more formal structures like neighbourhood associations, there are differences.

Reflections and experiences with such null conditions may serve not only as a comparison, but also may be one of many ways for checking the veracity of research findings. In place of the positivist terms of internal and external validity, epistemologies relying on qualitative data refer to credibility and transferability, respectively (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In the case of this thesis, I think time and experience have proven to be a strong test. I found myself removed from the immediate context, removed from the people making up the groups, removed from communities both geographic and academic. Living in different cities and reading different takes on our urban present and future exposed me to multiple realities, making me question what I had seen and believed. Through such shifts in perspective I was able to critically reflect on the stories I heard and the themes that I drew from the data. The insights born from these experiences and reflections were not arrived at lightly.

The data presented above, based as they are on qualitative interviews, are necessarily retrospective and subject to a wide range of interpretations. It is difficult to make definite statements about the broader impact of the organizations as a result. How are my findings transferable and thus applicable to other communities and cities? I hope that my descriptions of the two communities can provide a starting point: most likely, the experiences and insights I provide would be most applicable to denser urban settings and less so for suburban or rural communities, though there might be some points of commonality. I invite readers to be cognizant of both the stories that I have presented and the stories occurring within their own communities, especially the work of community residents and empowering organizations.

## Chapter / Variation 5: Insights

The narratives I have heard from Cherry Park and Cedar Hill, as recounted in the previous section, have implications beyond the borders of their respective neighbourhoods. In this variation, I will draw links between these voices to those of the literature, ecological processes, and broader trends in our society. Specific recommendations will be provided later in the Finale section.

### Associations and Empowerment

Returning to Maton (2008)'s work on empowering settings, Cedar Hill and Cherry Park show several characteristics related to empowerment. Organizationally, opportunity role-structures facilitated the entry of new members and allowed volunteers to follow their own skills and interests. Leadership and ongoing learning, two overarching concepts in Maton's model, were frequently cited by participants from both groups as key aspects related to their respective group's success.

Maton (2008)'s article provides a second insight into the work of these two neighbourhood associations. Beyond the empowerment of people directly in the empowering settings, Maton noted a "radiating influence" (p. 14) that can affect the families, social networks, and institutions of the empowered individual. This indirect effect could be seen in the two neighbourhoods through the development of informal connections; participants also commented that there seemed to be a general awareness of the neighbourhood associations in the communities, even by people who were not directly involved with the groups.

**Conceptual Models**

Earlier, I presented two conceptual models related to empowerment. The first (on page 30), which was developed for the thesis proposal, is a linear model outlining a theorized progression from individual, group, social, and environmental precursors, through enabling and inhibiting factors at different organizational levels, to goal-related and empowerment outcomes. The second model (on page 65) presents the major themes derived from the data in a holistic view that shows the neighbourhood associations and the themes situated within the overarching urban context.

How can these two models be reconciled? The themes from the interviews can be situated within the linear model with minimum difficulty: Safety concerns and the urban context serve as precursors, while organizational characteristics, focus, and learning can be categorized as intra- and inter-organizational enabling factors. The theme related to neighbourhood residents would fall under outcomes, though the fostering of a sense of ownership and informal connections could also serve to empower residents and thus the associations in the long run. This outcome would occur mostly through intra- and inter-organizational empowerment, but perhaps also through extra-organizational empowerment by means of the radiating influence suggested by Maton (2008).

Although this melding of models works on the surface, I believe that it undervalues the influence of the urban context. Specifically, the setting acts as more than just a backdrop for the associations and their activities: it also shapes organizational behaviour by influencing the availability of resources and the nature of challenges, as well as providing the impetus for ongoing organizational learning. Likewise, in a dense neighbourhood, organizational activities can have an impact beyond the immediate group

of members, and not just for activities that produce concrete results. Aspects traditionally classified as process-related, such as encouraging members to use their own skills or even just residents meeting on a regular basis to discuss neighbourhood issues, can empower individuals and build community. In this view, the process and outcome are more blurred, especially given the impact of ongoing learning and organizational flexibility.

**Neighbourhoods and Place**

Modern conceptualizations of community tend to focus on similarities. In his piece calling for a "return to community" in the field of community psychology, Heller (1989) distinguishes between geographical and relational communities. The former, Heller asserted, was in decline, with few people associating based on a shared location. More people found community through relations based on joint interests, even though such groups may form across geographic distances. Since that paper, electronic means of communication have made it easier to find and contact like-minded people across the world.

Heller (1989) goes on to suggest that a third type of community may be needed: a community based on collective power, a community where groups with different interests come together to share their strengths and power for mutual benefit. By substituting individual residents for groups in his definition, Cherry Park and Cedar Hill can be said to enact his third way, as each neighbourhood association reflects an instance of people coming together and sharing power to improve their communities. At the same time, they also belong to the same geographical community, reaffirming that the sense of place still maintains some degree of importance.

**Another View of Ecology**

The initial development of the walking and "Citizens on Patrol" groups in both associations reminded me of the concept of "pioneer species" from high school biology, hardy species whose presence signals the beginning of new growth after a catastrophe such as a forest fire, or in this case, crime and urban decay. Through their work, the presence and initial work by these residents, together with external resources such as the local police, created the conditions necessary for the neighbourhood associations to form and grow. Another useful metaphor from biological ecology is that of "indicator species" that are sensitive to environmental disruption and whose absence indicates poor living conditions. In the case of neighbourhoods, families with young children may fill this role; a Cedar Hill participant noted a recent influx of such families as one sign of the neighbourhood association's success.

If we continue the ecological metaphor further, at some point development goes too far. Power consolidates in too few hands, structures become ossified, and organizations lose their responsiveness. Alternatively, having fulfilled its initial purpose of responding to crime, the neighbourhood associations may fade away. In either case, the community continues, but at risk of decline. I remember conversing with one participant from Cedar Hill, who felt that the association needed to continue even in good times; another from the same association worried that new residents in the neighbourhood would not know the struggles the group had gone through to make the area safe, and thus might miss future warning signs of decline.

The ecological cycle of life, death, and rebirth has been recognized as beneficial in the natural world to the point where we apply practices such as periodic controlled-

burns in forests to cycle resources trapped in dead growth back into the ecosystem. We no longer view natural disasters in the wild as the end to life, with a realization that nature is resilient and can arise from the ashes. Our urban settings likewise show resiliency in the long term. A desirable area may degrade into a slum and later regain its former prosperity. However, even if the geographical neighbourhood survives and grows anew, the impact of decline or outright catastrophe on the social community and individual residents should not be downplayed or ignored. Is there another way to allow for needed renewal, one that minimizes or eliminates such suffering?

**Neighbourhood Associations Face Tensions**

In the second set of interviews, a final theme arose that I noticed in my initial interviews, but could not fit into my understanding at that earlier time. Participants from both groups in the first set reported conflicts between goals or ideals, where pairs of extreme positions had to be balanced. My later consideration of the effect of the urban context, with the subsequent second set of interviews, suggested a possible meaning behind these findings.

The idea of conflicting demands or tensions is nothing new in community psychology. Almost thirty years ago, Julian Rappaport (1981) argued that focusing solely on one approach, such as prevention or empowerment, was ultimately futile in the face of complex social issues that require divergent thinking and multiple types of intervention to tackle. Nelson and Prilleltensky (2005) noted that the three aspirations of the French Revolution – Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (Solidarity) – are in perpetual tension. Community can become controlling and impinge on personal freedoms, while individual liberty left unchecked can create and perpetuate systemic inequalities. As discussed

earlier, even though ameliorative work is overemphasized in society today, we cannot move away from it completely. There will always be situations which require an immediate reactive approach. Health-promotion campaigns do not eliminate the need for doctors or nurses, and crime prevention efforts go together with law enforcement.

There were two tensions identified by several participants from both associations. First, there is a tension between organizational efficiency and flexibility. Simple administrative tasks that would involve one staff at an office-based non-profit organization, such as contacting members or distributing newsletters, often requires coordination between several people in a volunteer-run group. Several Cherry Park members noted that, lacking a permanent space to hold events, extra time had to be spent with set-up and take-down in rented venues. Running events solely by volunteers requires overstaffing to cover for the possibility of people not showing up. One participant reported worrying at every association event as to whether enough volunteers would be present to make the event a success. A dwindling volunteer-base means more duties on fewer shoulders, which can lead to burnout in the long run.

While acknowledging these downsides of volunteer-run associations, participants also saw definite benefits. The small core-groups of involved members facilitated discussion and decision-making, making it easier to respond to new circumstances. Extending the idea of an opportunity role-structure, members with a new idea for a program or event could run with it as long as they were willing to put in the time and effort. Additionally, a program that lacked support and interest from the core members could be discontinued with little effort. This degree of flexibility would be difficult to

sustain in a more formally-structured non-profit group that had set staff positions and funding dependent on the organization providing certain services.

A second participant-identified tension is related to the role of the police. Traditional models of policing rely on control, where officers assert their authority in response to a situation or potential situation in order to protect people from harm and apprehend suspected lawbreakers. In contrast, a community-based approach to policing requires those in authority to surrender some degree of control to neighbourhood residents, be it in building general neighbourhood-capacity through social events, relying on local leaders, or even assigning officers to work directly with the neighbourhood association to address complaints directly, "on the ground."

Although not explicitly mentioned by participants, I noticed two additional dichotomies arising within their stories: Simplicity -- complexity, and individual -- community. Both neighbourhood associations, in action and understanding, balanced simplicity and complexity. Activities like walking groups of neighbourhood residents, community cleanups, and regular meetings were clear and simple demonstrations that people cared about the state of their neighbourhood and were willing to act. At the same time, both groups established working relationships with a broad spectrum of people and organizations, from city hall to local businesses, schools, and faith groups. Members from Cedar Hill actively participated in judicial and political processes related to housing bylaws and planning, and alternately worked with and against landlords to maintain rental-housing standards in their area. Cherry Park forged links with a methadone clinic located in the neighbourhood to build mutual understanding and address concerns, and

also participated in a council of local businesses and organizations in support of the local public high school.

In listening to participants' stories, I noticed a nuanced understanding of their communities and the forces that influence those settings. For example, when speaking about the benefits of their youth drop-in program, Cherry Park participants mentioned not just the recreational benefits, but also the building of connections and trust between the youth and the adults of the association. The hope was that working with youth and improving their relationships with adult residents would improve the safety of the community. In Cedar Hill, their view of the crime in their area drew a line between people and problematic behaviours; even if a person's actions were not benefiting the neighbourhood, they were still considered as person within that community.

Lastly, the fourth tension arose as neighbourhood associations tried to bridge the individual and the community. There was recognition from participants in both associations that their groups could not control individuals nor their communities. The actions of an individual could impact the community and the community shapes the experiences of the individual. The interests of the one and the many could also be disparate and not easily reconciled. At first glace, neighbourhood associations appear to stand in the chasm between the individual and the community. These organizations are made up of individuals seeking to serve the community, but also may bring to the individual the resources of the community.

**Paradox**

> *But there is a third way to respond, a way beyond choosing either this pole or that: let us call it "living the contradictions" ... The poles of either-or, the*

*choices we thought we had to make, may become signs of a larger truth* ... (p. 6: Palmer, 1980)

By definition, a paradox involves two truths that together appear to be a contradiction in terms, but on further examination could unveil a new understanding. Paradox has been acknowledged as important in a field like community psychology that deals with complex issues; a given situation may not have an obvious "right" answer or path to take (Rappaport, 1981). Relevant to neighbourhood associations, Newbrough (1995) saw a third way through the struggle between the one and the many by focusing on equality and justice.

The neighbourhood associations initially did the simple step of creating community walking-groups or sitting out to be eyes and ears on the street in response to crime, but future work would bring a nuanced understanding of community issues. Life in our urban centres change constantly; neighbourhood associations can provide a sense of history as well as a way to respond with the changes. Flexibility and stability in an organization both bring benefits and drawbacks. Weick (1998) talks about this duality through a metaphor rooted in jazz music; improvisation requires creativity together with an underlying order. Likewise, a touchstone, such as a paid staff-person from the community or some type of community space, can provide structure while still being responsive to the neighbourhood.

The urban story, so long mythologized in terms of alienation and individualism, takes on new meaning. Extreme anonymity and self-protection from others can fall away with only minimal intervention. Earlier, I commented on the ecological metaphor for urban communities, with the dangers of stagnation and collapse: neighbourhood

associations can guide renewal in a sustainable way. It is not the case of prizing either the individual or the community over the other. Neighbourhood associations can act as an example of a third way.

A group of organized residents do not achieve this aim simply by virtue of being a neighbourhood association; rather, a balance is needed. Efficiency and flexibility. Control and responsiveness. Simple action and complex understanding. Change and consistency. Individuals and communities. Our small groups of committed individuals can help cut through these dichotomies and point the way for improving our cities and thus our world.

## Finale: Future Steps on Many Paths

In recounting the stories of my participants, their associations, and communities, I have woven those threads together with my own journey and the observations of other thinkers. If you were expecting a straightforward story with a conventional linear plot, I apologize for disappointing you. There will be no neat ending, because the tale of these two neighbourhoods and their residents continues, as do the stories of the local government offices, businesses, schools, churches, and agencies, and the narratives of the city, the region, the province, the country, and the world.

Nor have I presented what is typically considered clear-cut empirical research findings. Cause and effect between process and outcomes within organizations can be difficult to separate in any form of non-experimental research, and this case is no exception. Although my positivist training steered me towards asking causal questions initially, what makes sense in a lab does not necessarily translate to urban settings. Neighbours are not randomly assigned, nor are residents to communities. An illustration of this complexity is found in the informal interactions with neighbours: For example, founding members of the association may have had contact with their neighbours before the group existed and utilized these connections as a starting point for the association. Furthermore, the possibility of interactions cannot be ruled out. People who become involved with these groups may be predisposed for various reasons to talk to others, with the neighbourhood association merely providing some small support that enables these budding community connectors. Within this context and with my methods, all I can say is that based on what my participants and I experienced, these informal interactions memorably occurred after our involvement in neighbourhood associations.

Although I could be disappointed in what I did not measure, namely cause-and-effect, when seeking to answer what neighbourhood associations do and how they do it, the voices in this research provide an understanding of individual and shared experiences of initiatives, aims, challenges, and sources of strength.

**Recommendations and Implications**

Just as the research literature informed this research, so I hope to contribute to future works and words through the following recommendations. The conversations I am joining include those spoken within both academic and geographic communities, so my insights are addressed to both accordingly. This research suggests implications for the three different audiences to whom this work may speak: neighbourhood associations, community practitioners, and researchers.

First, to all interested minds, remember the urban context. Cities may appear to be chaotic, but thinkers from diverse fields have made observations and noticed patterns in the maelstrom. Understand how cities work and how they fail, and keep those factors in mind as you work together to improve our neighbourhoods for all. Such understanding may be derived from many sources including further research, listening to others' words both print and spoken (including and beyond those cited here), and reflection on experience.

To the neighbourhood associations, continue your good work (obviously), and continue your conversations. I suggested earlier that one way of thinking about your role is in light of balancing tensions, such as acting as a bridge between the individual and community. Take your awareness of these tensions as a starting point for discussion as you move forward. Secondly, although generally well-connected to community partners,

the neighbourhood associations I worked with for this project did not have as much success reaching out to groups representing new arrivals to Canada. More and more newcomers are calling urban areas, including Kitchener, home, and for neighbourhood associations to continue to be relevant, understanding their diverse perspectives and connecting with them are essential tasks.

To community practitioners, understand the dichotomies that neighbourhood groups often face as they respond to their dynamic urban environment. Support and structure are needed to ward against burnout, but too much of the same could rob the associations of their flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of their residents. The need to widen or at least revisit how success is defined in community settings is another important lesson. Similar to my initial bias, practitioners may seek concrete changes, only to conclude that little is being done. However, the impact of neighbourhood associations encompasses more than just physical edifices and projects. As this thesis demonstrates, the impact also exists in new informal interactions, sense of safety, and growing understanding.

Community groups and practitioners should also look at activities and factors associated with successful neighbourhood-based organizations in other studies. For example, Wandersman and Florin (2000) noted that active block associations worked to reduce the "costs" of volunteering through several avenues, including continued partnerships between neighbourhood associations and other local organizations that help reduce barriers to participation and increase membership through improved outreach efforts. Likewise, Maton (2008) notes several organizational characteristics that are

associated with empowering settings, including external linkages and bridging mechanisms that act to maintain the groups and also assist them in navigating change.

To the researchers with interest in this field, seek to understand the urban setting in which neighbourhood associations act and evolve. A comparative approach with community-based groups in different cities or contexts, such as suburban or rural neighbourhoods, could provide additional evidence on the impact of setting. In particular, a closer examination of the themes discussed earlier, such as organizational characteristics and learning, may reveal how these processes evolve and present themselves in different contexts. One approach to studying context is the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): however, Voorhees (2009) found that although many community researchers make use of ecological model principles for theoretical support, adherence to the model drops sharply for measurement of outcomes. Given the nested nature of individuals within groups within communities, I invite you to build upon this initial exploration through the use of more advanced methods. Quantitative approaches utilizing statistical techniques such as Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) may prove useful for examining the nested, interdependent, multiple layers within urban settings, as a quantitative complement to the rich insights from a wide range of qualitative approaches (as described in Patton, 2002).

The empowering settings research, as exemplified by Maton (2008), provides a framework for future efforts in this area. In particular, a more direct examination of "radiating influence" in a neighbourhood would be interesting; one method would be to interview non-members in areas with and without active neighbourhood associations. Maton provides several suggestions for the community psychologist interested in

empowering settings. We can engage in strategic work to legitimize and promote such organizations, both to professionals and the general public, as well as provide more direct support through collaboration. Promoting change in settings that are not empowering (or even disempowering), combined with social policy reform, can have a broad impact beyond individual people, groups and communities.

At my thesis presentation, one of my committee members asked me what advice I would give to a class of first-year Masters's students in community psychology. Building on my verbal response at that time, here is what I would say:

> *I know that as part of your coursework, you'll learn about the ecological model with its multiple nested levels. It's an important model for our field, and for those of you coming from a more traditional field of social science (like mainstream psychology), it may take you some time to get used to thinking beyond the individual and incorporating the impact of relationships, communities, and societies into your analyses. Be careful not to treat it as just another component to your papers, something to report in a walled-off section and then ignored for the remainder. To understand the impact of ecology better, take a look at your own "community", however you define it. How does it function (or not)? What forces are at play, from outside or within? What changes are occurring, who is driving those changes, and who benefits from them? Do not be afraid to bring yourself into the picture - your own insights, your own reflections, your own life. It may not be an easy path, but it is possible to balance narrative and research. By recognizing your own story, you recognize those of others.*

Applying these suggestions can take several forms for researchers, practitioners, and community members, including through joint ventures. Neighbourhood associations can be strengthened generally through improved partnerships that move beyond resource sharing to include knowledge sharing, with an aim of knowledge co-generation rather than a one-way transfer from research "experts" to community recipients. One potential for this approach would be on the issue of outreach to newcomers to Canada. A collaborative approach involving neighbourhood associations, immigrant-serving agencies, university researchers, and social planning groups could determine where newcomer populations are living in the city, identify challenges in outreach and participation, and develop educational resources for both newcomers and the associations to encourage bridging. An example of this approach can be seen in Kingston, where as part of its strategy to build a welcoming community, the Kingston Immigration Partnership (n.d.) includes actions such as "[providing] resources and information packages for community organizations to help them reach out to newcomers."

Participatory action research (PAR: Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998), with its focus on working with people as equals in the research process to create change, can teach us more about the strengths and needs of neighbourhood groups and lead to knowledge sharing, dissemination and mobilization. Based on this work, the establishment of more permanent community-university partnerships can help neighbourhood associations access resources and, more importantly, continue learning.

As a larger target, I recommend that beyond asking how these groups change our cities, why not ask how can we change our cities to better support neighbourhoods and their residents? Although I have touched on some basic literature related to urban settings

and planning in this thesis, I admit to lacking formal training in this area: connecting with trained urban planners could prove useful towards the goal of creating livable cities[13].

Finally, this idea can be taken seriously or tongue-in-cheek: the next time you move to a new city, consider living in a neighbourhood like Cherry Park or Cedar Hill. You might learn something just from walking its streets, meeting your neighbours, and experiencing the benefits and the challenges of these settings.

**Celebrating These Small Groups of Dedicated People**

I will end this journey on a decidedly encouraging note. I posit that grassroots urban groups like Cedar Hill and Cherry Park are one possible path to creating a third way and a better world. Current and upcoming crises, ranging from climate change to widespread poverty to cultural conflict, may appear to be intractable and pervasive, with little that an individual or even small groups of individuals can do to enact meaningful change. I argue, however, that those individuals of Cherry Park, Cedar Hill, and other similar groups have already made a difference, beyond bringing down crime-rates or building community-gardens; they talked to one another. They went beyond the bounds of their own residences and met with others, even those that were not of like-mind. They defied the societal norms of extreme individualism, realizing that they had to and can work together and with other partners to improve their communities. In doing so, they strove for a balance between the individual and community. They moved beyond a simple black-and-white duality to see the complexity of issues occurring within their urban settings.

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[13] Or perhaps not – recall that Jane Jacobs had no formal training in urban planning, and often railed against planners who allowed their theories to triumph over what they saw in cities (e.g. Jacobs, 1961).

My participants may be embarrassed by this characterization of them, where I appear to cast them in the role of heroes, albeit reluctant ones. Some may categorize their motives pragmatically, others in terms of altruism or civic pride. I hold, though, that they are changing the world, that if there are more Cherry Parks and Cedar Hills, we can make an impact on those big issues that seem so insurmountable. The cities provide the crucible for change, with a scale and access to resources to maximize the impact of efforts, while also providing an environment that encourages simple actions and complex understandings. We need to support such groups -- help them form, assist them in finding resources, and serve as that critical friend or alternate perspective if they become too set in their actions or thoughts. Small groups of dedicated people can change the world, writes Margaret Mead; this is still an important place for community psychology to focus.

## Coda

> *[This writing] is an ensemble piece. It asks that you read it with other texts, in other contexts, and with others. It asks for a performance, one in which we might discover that our autoethnographic texts are not alone. It is a performance that asks how our personal accounts count.* (p. 764: Holman Jones, 2005)

Serendipity often plays a key role in research work, and this thesis is no exception. One example that occurred near the very end of this journey may sound almost too stereotypical to be true, like the idea of two undergraduate philosophy majors discovering the meaning of all life's mysteries during a late night discussion in a dorm room. There we were, three graduate students - Carolyn, one of her fellow doctoral students from Queen's Faculty of Education, and I - sitting on our back deck, relaxing, having a beer and discussing theoretical frameworks and epistemology. On the Friday of the August long-weekend, no less. Who says that graduate students don't have a life?

Referencing Michael Quinn Patton's (2002) bible of qualitative research, we were trying to determine how our respective research ideas fit within his classification of theoretical frameworks. Coming into the discussion a bit late, I decided to provide my two co-discussants with a description of how I viewed my thesis work, at this point close to completion, and let them suggest which categories might fit. Although some of their suggestions were as expected, one was not: autoethnography. Even after going through all of the suggestions and discussing their research as well, the possibility stuck in my mind, leading me to revisit Patton's writing on theoretical frameworks.

Given that the bulk of my thesis was written before I learned about autoethnography, I cannot claim it as an inspiration for the approach I took. The primary

benefit of this insight was to help situate myself within this thesis in style, content and writing, and thus define a purpose for my approach, a goal that has eluded me for most of this journey. Just as my words have situated these community groups within their context and highlighted the roles that individual community members play, my own personal story has been given ground through this exploration. In his experience with autoethnography, Bruner (1996) noted how his personal and professional lives became entwined, impossible to separate; likewise, I can no longer differentiate between my selves of community member, researcher, and someone with a simple curiosity about the world. As the neighbourhoods grew and changed over time, so have I.

In the previous section, I highlighted some potential paths for the neighbourhood associations, practitioners, and researchers to take. As this long process draws to a close, I too have found a way forward.

> *So the question is not, "Does my story reflect my past accurately?" as if I were holding a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, "What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of a person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?"* (p. 746: Ellis & Bochner, 2000)

## Appendix A: Initial Interview/Focus Group Questions

You have been invited to participate in this interview because of your involvement with neighbourhood associations in Kitchener. The purpose of this research is to examine what enables or prevents neighbourhood associations from reaching their goals. Please read this information letter and fill out the consent form; if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask.

(If they consent to use of recording) I will be using this audio recording device for the purpose of recording the interview. If at any time you want the recording device turned off, please let me know. If you have no further questions, I will turn on the recorder and start the interview now.

1) What is your role within the neighbourhood association?

2) Tell me about some of the organization's accomplishments. What changes or improvements has the group made?

(probe) How has the association affected individuals, specific groups of people, the neighbourhood, the city/region as a whole

3) What factors or conditions, if any have aided the association in bringing about these changes?

(probe) How does the association's structure affect its success, if at all?

4) What factors or conditions, if any, have hindered or held the association back from achieving its goals?

(probe) How does the association's structure prevent success, if at all?

5) What resources can the association draw on to bring about change?

(probe) Physical, financial, human

6) Can you recall any specific instances where the association worked with other people or organizations to create change?

(probe) Other neighbourhood associations, other non-profits, community or government institutions (e.g. schools, police), businesses, city staff, politicians

7) What is your vision for the group? What does it have now to help achieve that vision, and what does it need?

Thank you for participating in the interview. I will now turn off the audio recording device.

**Appendix B: Initial Report (Summer 2007)**

# The Power of Many: Neighbourhood Associations

# Participant Summary Report

## Introduction

This summary report is a brief overview of the results for those who participated in the research study I conducted with Cedar Hill Community Group and Cherry Park Neighbourhood Association, for my Masters' thesis in Community Psychology at WLU.

In completing this research, I am indebted to several people: Karen Taylor-Harrison (Cedar Hill) and Debra Chapman (Cherry Park), as representatives of the two neighbourhood groups, my advisor at Laurier, Dr. Scot Evans, my friends and family, and finally, the individuals I spoke with in these two communities, whose dedication and love for their neighbourhoods has been personally inspiring.

## Research Thesis Overview

The purpose of this research project, broadly speaking, is to examine how community groups such as Cherry Park and Cedar Hill are able to achieve their goals. Drawing on recent studies in community psychology on the idea of empowerment , I focused on how groups themselves are empowered (rather than at the usual approach of studying the empowerment of individuals). Specifically, I explored the processes and organizational structures within these neighbourhood associations that could help or hinder the groups in improving their communities. I was also interested in seeing what kind of resources these groups were using to reach these goals.

I chose to work with Cedar Hill and Cherry Park for several reasons. Both neighbourhood groups were born out of concerns around crime and safety in their communities. The two neighbourhoods are similar in terms of geography, being in or near downtown Kitchener. Furthermore, both associations have a strong grass-roots focus.

Utilizing a case-study approach, I was able to talk with members of both groups, as well as some "outsiders" such as city staff and police, as a part of an interview or focus group context. In analyzing the results, I looked for similarities between the two associations, as well as notable differences.

The results and conclusions presented below represent my initial findings from this research project. As with any type of research in real-life settings, it can be difficult to separate cause from effect. Furthermore, what is true for Cherry Park and Cedar Hill may not be applicable for other groups, even different neighbourhood associations in Kitchener.

## Similarities Across the Two Groups

- *Organizational structure* - Cherry Park and Cedar Hill are both characterized by a structure that allows for flexibility and the use of member's diverse talents and interests. Previous research on community groups has indicated that the presence of such an "opportunity role structure" is beneficial for the organization and its members.

- *Leadership* - The efforts and perseverance of the associations' leadership was frequently mentioned, particularly in advocating for the association and the broader community.

- *Building Connections* - Both groups have made links with different groups and organizations to share ideas and resources, such as local schools, churches and the City of Kitchener. As well, the two associations have liaised with various stakeholders in the area, such as landlords (Cedar Hill) and a local methadone clinic (Cherry Park), to address issues of concern.

- *Safety* - Neighbourhood safety has been a key concern for Cedar Hill and Cherry Park, with both groups tracing their origins to people coming together to address the issue of crime in their community. The associations developed good relationships with Waterloo Regional Police Service, who have provided information and supported initiatives such as a regular nightly walking group in Cherry Park, and Citizens on Patrol in Cedar Hill.
  - Safety has also been viewed more broadly by the two groups through preventative measures, education, and neighbourhood improvements.

- *Resources* - As noted above, both groups are run primarily by volunteers living in the neighbourhood. While some funding and material resources are available from the City of Kitchener, the associations primarily have to rely on what they themselves can find and bring to the table. In particular, their members bring a passionate commitment to their communities, along with a different skills, interests and personal connections to resources within and outside the community.
  - As with any volunteer-run organization, there is the risk of losing volunteers through lack of time, loss of interest or personal "burnout" - a fear that some participants expressed.
  - Through working with each other to improve their communities, group members felt a sense of pride and ownership of their neighbourhoods,

which helps to motivate future work within the organization and in the community in general.

- *Social Connections* - Many participants in this study reported that their involvement with the neighbourhood association led to them getting to know their neighbours better and having more informal interactions, including with people who weren't active members of the group. As well, they gained a broader understanding of the different people living in the area, helping them move away from viewing the neighbourhood's residents in terms of "us" and "them".

## Differences

One obvious difference between the two groups are their histories. Cedar Hill has been in existence since the late 1980s, while Cherry Park started in 2006 (though predecessors of CPNA existed in the late 1990s).

Regarding the focus of resources, a community member from the Cedar Hill area has been hired as a paid coordinator for the Downtown East project, which includes working with that neighbourhood. Cherry Park is actively investigating the possibility of using an office building as a community centre that can be used for meetings and programs such as its youth drop-in; the need for such a space to help increase community involvement and decrease the likelihood of volunteer burnout was mentioned.

An unique issue that residents of Cedar Hill reported facing is stigma about their neighbourhood, particularly in the media, as the result of widely-publicized criminal activity in the area during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Also mentioned was the amount of supportive housing in the area and the need for a balance in the composition of the neighbourhood.

As a neighbourhood association located in the official downtown area of Kitchener, Cedar Hill belongs to the Downtown Neighbourhood Alliance along with 5 other such groups. This alliance provides recreational programming at the Downtown Community Centre, and also works with other stakeholders such as businesses to improve the downtown core.

## Some Thoughts

Cherry Park and Cedar Hill have both accomplished much in their respective communities, by both drawing on the interests and abilities of their members and making connections with groups inside and outside of their neighbourhoods. As noted, both groups face the potential issue of losing their volunteer base, including through burnout. Spending time on volunteer recruitment, training and recognition could help increase numbers and retention of existing members. Furthermore, increasing links with schools in the area could prove quite beneficial, particularly with the volunteer hours

requirement for secondary students and the various co-op, practicum and service-learning programs in local universities and college.

Urban neighbourhoods tend to attract a variety of individuals, leading neighbourhood associations to work with a diverse range of people and groups to address complex issues. For example, Kitchener is home to a large number of newcomers to Canada, a fact recognized by members of both groups. Efforts currently being made to invite and encourage involvement by new immigrants and refugees should be continued and extended. The two communities of Cedar Hill and Cherry Park face many opportunities and challenges in the coming years, as development, government policies and societal trends bring change to our neighbourhoods. Working to everyone in the community and reaching out to different groups and organizations will continue to be necessary to deal with this complexity of issues.

## So What's Next?

Over the next month or two, I will expand on these initial findings and incorporate previous research on neighbourhood organizations, in order to present a full written Masters' thesis in the fall. If any new insights come up that may be of interest to the two community groups, I will pass them along to the two representatives. Also, if there is interest from either of the groups I could host a presentation and discussion of the results later on in the year.

If you have any feedback or questions about this report, please feel free to contact me by email (brian@eudaimonia.ca).

## Appendix C: Follow-Up (Summer 2009) Interview Questions

You have been invited to participate in this interview because of your involvement with neighbourhood associations in Kitchener. The purpose of this broadened research is to examine the influence of neighbourhood associations on and from the urban context, in addition to what enables or prevents neighbourhood associations from reaching their goals. Please read this information letter and fill out the consent form; if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask.

(If they consent to use of recording) I will be using this audio recording device for the purpose of recording the interview. If at any time you want the recording device turned off, please let me know. If you have no further questions, I will turn on the recorder and start the interview now.

What role, broadly speaking, does the neighbourhood association play in this community and city?

> (probe) impact on community e.g. safety, cleanup
> (probe) impact on people e.g. creating a sense of community, providing space for people to use their skills
> (probe) impact on different groups of people e.g. newcomers/immigrants, youth, seniors

What is the influence of the neighbourhood itself on the work of the neighbourhood association?

> (probe) How might the neighbourhood association change if it was located in a different setting or another area of the city such as a suburb?
> (probe) Physical layout, available amenities and services, location, people living in the area, general atmosphere.

How would your community be affected if the neighbourhood association did not exist?

(follow-up) In previous interviews and focus groups, participants mentioned that the neighbourhood association has worked with other organizations such as schools, the police, local businesses and the city government. What does the neighbourhood association provide that is unique, compared to these other groups?

> (follow-up) How is the neighbourhood association influenced by these groups? How does it influence these groups?

Thank you for participating in the interview. I will now turn off the audio recording device.

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