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Community on the Menu: Seven-Courses to Cultivate Familial Bonds, Exchange Social Capital, and Nourish Community

David Franklin Purnell
University of South Florida, dpurnell@mail.usf.edu

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Community on the Menu: Seven-Courses to Cultivate Familial Bonds, Exchange Social Capital, and Nourish Community

by

David Franklin Purnell

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment Of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology Department of Communication College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

Major Professor: Frederick Steier, Ph.D. Jane Jorgenson, Ph.D. Carolyn Ellis, Ph.D. Donileen Loseke, Ph.D.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family. I had gone through my adult life like a raft floating through a vast sea—isolated. I am grateful that we came to know one another. I am grateful for the familial bonds that we share. You have been my strength, my heart, my very breath. Thank you for your support over the years, and for allowing me to become a part of your lives.
Acknowledgments

This has been a labor of love—one I definitely could not have endured without the patience, guidance, and support of my committee. I especially want to thank my major professor, Fred Steier, for taking the brunt of my frustrations and guiding me along this process especially during times when I was on the verge of ___________ (fill in the blank). Thank you to Carolyn Ellis for the advice that has been given and will continue to be given along this journey and, I am sure, future ones as well. Thank you to my entire committee for their valuable contributions to this work. I especially want to thank Steve Johns. Without you Steve, I would never have had the courage and the stick-to-it-ness to make it through my doctoral program. While I may have doubted the process and myself at times, none of you ever lost faith in my ability to finish this work.
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Abstract

This dissertation is an auto/ethnographic account, which examines food, close personal friendships, and community. The research combines autoethnography with ethnographic observations and personal/group interviews conducted within the Seminole Heights neighborhood of Tampa, Florida. The observations are of a weekly dinner event referred to by most attendees as Family Dinner. I am one of the founders of this event; the participants of this study are neighbors (or were at some point in time) as well as past and present attendees of the weekly dinner.

The purpose of this research is to illustrate how food can be a tool to build community. In the Seminole Heights neighborhood, food acts as a communicator/builder of community and produces (a) nourishment for close personal bonds, and (b) sustainment of social capital. The nourishment and sustainment are made possible through (c) interaction. While there are many works of literature that discuss the topics of food, bonds, social capital, and interaction, little has been written on how these aspects function synergistically to create community. Using literature that speaks to food, close personal bonds, social capital, and interactions, I examine how these key aspects integrate with the ideas of community and their relationship to community building. I specifically address how people form community around the sharing of food and social interactions. In order to do so, I explore the role food plays in nourishing this community and look at how people experience and participate in community through the sharing of food.

There are three areas comprising my research.

1. First, the observations describe the interactions of the community.
2. Secondly, the interviews give a sense of the weekly dinners from participants who still attend, who no longer live close enough to continue attending, and who have stopped attending for reasons other than their proximity to the neighborhood.

3. Lastly, the weaving of ethnography with autoethnography allows for a reflexive view of what these dinners mean, not only to myself, but also to those who participated in this research project. This study focuses on what constitutes community according to participants—their conceptions of community. In Addition, it illustrates the role food plays in nourishing community, and the participant’s role in sustaining community.
Introduction

Shared Meals

Gone are the days of a traditional sit-down dinner. With all the distractions, difficulties, and complications of contemporary life, it is difficult for most families to gather around the dinner table on a frequent basis—if at all. DDB Worldwide\(^1\) (1998), in fact, estimates that families in America who eat dinner together regularly (i.e., five or more times per week) fell from 44% in 1977 to just 26% in 1998. One in ten Americans report eating together as a family only once per week, and another one in ten report never sitting down for an evening dinner with family at all (Daily Mail Reporter, 2010).

Community interaction can begin by sharing a meal with others. Putnam (2000) wrote that there is “less involvement in community activities” (p.25) than there has been in the past. Additionally, Patterson & Kim (1994) document that 72% of the American public report not knowing their neighbors. Much of the foundation for studying the decline of community was laid by Wirth (1938) and has continued with the writings of Fischer (1972, 1976) and Wellman & Leighton (1979). Putnam (1995, 2000) has been one of the most recent contributors to the discussion of the decline of community. These authors state in various ways that people have been separated from their families and

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\(^1\) The DDB Worldwide Needham Life Style Surveys began in 1975 and continue to provide regular barometric readings on scores of social, economic, political, and personal themes. With an annual sample of 3,500-4,000 people, this archive contained more than 87,000 respondents as of 1999. To the extent that it can be shown to be methodologically reliable, the DDB Worldwide archive constitutes one of the richest known sources of data on social change in America in the last quarter of the twentieth century.
placed in locations without many close connections causing a weakening of individual attachment to not only family, but also community. Furthermore, there appears to be a general agreement among these authors with Park’s (1952) sentiment that "in the city environment the neighborhood tends to lose much of the significance which it [once] possessed" (p. 20). The lost significance in the city environment, according to Park, was interaction. The lack of interaction is a self-removal from community, as well as community events, due to the busy city life (Park, 1952).

Despite the reported decline of sit-down dinners and community participation, or perhaps because of it, the Seminole Heights neighborhood of Tampa, Florida has made it a priority to eat together once a week as “family.” Affectionately referred to as family dinner, the weekly tradition has continued now for over thirteen years. This study explores the unique phenomenon of family dinner in order to make an inquiry into the act of eating together as literal and figurative nourishment and its concomitant occurrences of increased community interactions and involvement among the participants/attendees of family dinner.

Through the lens of food, this dissertation aims to bring to focus practices of community building with two goals in mind:

1. The relationship of how food is not only a tool to build community, but also a tool to sustain a sense of community that emerges through the sharing of food.

2. Exploring the relationship between food and community through (a) bonding, (b) social capital, and (c) interactions/story telling while supplementing Oldenburg’s (2000) concept of third place.
Bonding

The interaction of sharing food becomes an avenue for social and communal introduction; people attending the weekly family dinners can share something about themselves through the food they bring. As relationships grow, familial bonds may be established and the concept of family and what it means may shift for some moving into the realm of “families of choice” (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, p. 133). Often, as people move to new locations, they are separated from their birth families. Others have poor or even severed relations with their families. It seems that sitting down to a family dinner may create a bonding of close familial relationships when their actual birth families may be too distant to maintain or where the family relationship is lacking altogether.

How, then, does food help build community? Food is often considered to be simply a chemical makeup of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates that sustains us and provides us with the energy needed to accomplish daily activities. Williams (1958) discussed the transparent nature of everyday occurrences that are deemed as ordinary; eating is one such occurrence. Food, however, is far from ordinary, and its significance extends beyond its life-sustaining qualities. Food also has the potential to build community and encourage community interaction; sharing food is a communal endeavor. Food offers a glimpse into the lives of others, and how others view us; it is the center of social interaction. While we do eat to sustain our bodies and minds, we also eat to demonstrate our belonging to particular social groups (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Seamon & Sowers, 2008).

This dissertation further expands this notion of inclusion into social groups by addressing how food also helps us sustain close friendships and community involvement. Food as a site of study has a relatively young history in the field of communication. Until
recently (see Lindenfeld & Langellier, 2009), few scholars have responded to Henderson’s (1970) call for communication scholars to look at food as a serious area of research (pp. 3-8). I will investigate food’s general relevance to community by applying the theories of Visser (1991) who noted that we share meals with others to form social relationships, which is a useful perspective on learning and knowing through a shared endeavor. This study also builds on Oldenburg’s (2000) concept of “third places” to include neighborhood events that take place in a relaxed atmosphere within private homes that are open to anyone interested in participating.

Definitive research that focuses on how food affects communal (familial) bonds and social capital is limited. This project looks at gaps in the literature by conducting observations using the method Van Maanen (1988) refers to as “impressionistic tales.” Integrating these tales with interviews conducted of a representative group of participants—long-term participants, participants who no longer attend for various reasons, and new attendees—supports my claims of community being nourished through food. Thus, this project contextualizes community through the framework of food as a communicative tool and symbol of belonging. This study will outline the various “courses” of community building. With this goal in mind, I will use the format of a menu with its various courses to present the different ways in which food becomes a way to nourish community.

Food connects people (Visser, 1991). The interactions among attendees of family dinner put emphasis on the effect of food as a socializing mechanism through which we develop connections. Social networks address how people interact with each other and create a sense of community. Community can be developed in different ways, and this dissertation makes inquiries regarding how the sense of community is nourished through
the process of sharing food. According to Frank (1999), activities such as group dinners bring pleasure to individuals through interaction, thereby establishing stronger bonds, social capital and a sense of community.

**Social Capital**

By sharing food, a relationship of reciprocity is enacted. When I host an event in my home, I do not expect to be hosted in return. Instead, because I have done something without expectation, guests naturally have a desire to reciprocate should the opportunity arise. In other words, the foundation of reciprocity naturally (or organically) arises through hosting neighborhood events. This study aims to determine how hosting and reciprocity affect the establishment and expansion of social capital and community.

Furthermore, social network theory emphasizes the importance of social capital and its role in the routines of daily life (Putnam, 2000); of trust and its relationship to social bonds (Jones & George, 1998); and of conformity to the action of attending communal events (Galaskiewicz, 1991). By looking at food as community nourishment, I establish connections between the creation of familial bonds and the production of social capital through what I refer to as the community-food effect.

**Interactions/Storytelling**

For the purpose of this study, I have found it useful to reflect on *Rethinking Friendship* (Spencer & Pahl, 2006), which stated that personal bonds help establish a network of support that extends friendship into a realm similar to that of family. According to Seamon & Sowers (2008), the familial connection is what creates the attachment to the neighborhood dinners that I, and hopefully others, have experienced
over the years. The close bonds created allow for the sharing of our stories. Frie (2011) suggested that we give meaning to our past (both struggles and accomplishments) and point to our future (both challenges and goals) through the stories we tell.

At times, we are not able to make connections to places and people; we have a constant parade of characters in and out of our lives, but the brevity precludes close bonding connections. The longevity of the neighborhood dinners enables this dissertation to create a narrative arc reflecting on the possibility of making connections through the sharing of food.

Bochner (2002) discussed how the stories of others allow us to understand our own stories. When applied to my own personal life, I came to understand more about my own connection to the neighborhood dinners through the stories that I have heard over the course of my research for this dissertation. I also realized that my own lack of connection to individuals in my past is why I strive to make connections with those who attend the neighborhood dinners, and wonder if others might share my sentiments.

Interactions and connections to individual stories began by forming a weekly neighborhood dinner. As the dinners grew, so too did the connections that were made through the interactions that took place during family dinner. In essence, this study responds to Denton’s (1982) call for “scholars to examine interacting individuals” (p. 55; see also Proctor 2004). It is through these family dinners that the interactions of human life have been examined.

The participation in community events and the interactions that take place at such events are one of the most important aspects of making connections to places (Milligan, 1998). Milligan presented an interaction-based theory of place attachment to explain why we become connected to our created environment. According to Milligan, “Place
attachment is significantly based on the meaningfulness of the interaction itself (which then imbues a site with meaning), not on the inherent meaningfulness of the place in which it occurs” (p. 28). Strictly speaking, people are not attached to structures or places themselves, but rather to the interactions that take place within those structures or places. Family dinner serves as the structure/place that “imbues a sight with meaning” through the interactions that occur.

Community participation in events is important to the social interaction (Barthes, 2008; Levi-Strauss, 1983; Mead, 1934) of family dinner. This study examines how individuals interact and make connections through storytelling at the weekly dinner events to foster the creation of place (Peace, Holland, & Kellaher, 2005). Place, after all, is not pre-existing, but created (Duyvendak, 2011). In other words, place is cultivated and nurtured, maturing over time (Tilley, 1994). Hence, the research methods featured outline the key approach I use in my dissertation.

**Third Places**

*Third places* are designed to emulate home environments in order to provide a relaxing, inviting atmosphere. Other attributes that make a third place a third place: it has to be convenient, inviting, and have regulars. Regulars, according to Oldenburg (2000), are actually more important than having a good host. People have had third places throughout history, and they’ve ranged from coffee houses to pubs, but why not allow the use of homes, during specific designated periods of time, to join the ranks of other third places? I take that notion of *third place* a step further and apply it to the host homes when those homes are used as meeting places during family dinner. The location of family dinner, like traditional third places, becomes a home away from home. This
aspect is created due to the inviting nature of the weekly dinner event that has an open door policy welcoming people of varying backgrounds to interact with one another in a relaxed home environment. I contend that it is the use of the space and not the structure itself that designates it as a *third place*.

**Challenges**

As hypothesized, creating community through food sharing is a basic way to get to know neighbors and strengthen social ties. Pollan wrote, “Food consists not just in piles of chemicals; it also comprises a set of social relationships” (2008, p.144). Social relationships are at the heart of the community-food effect in which stronger bonds are formed. This study looks at the welcoming atmosphere created through food and its effect on community. Additionally, my thirteen years of experience in this community in tandem with the experience of other community members informed this study.

A previous class project, “Food, Friendship, and Fury” written in 2011, in which the dynamic of conflicts at the weekly dinners were examined, inspired this dissertation; this builds upon that work by inquiring how these dinners nourish community. The most challenging part of this study was weaving the ethnographical accounts from observations and interviews with the autoethnographical aspects that I “brought to the table,” so to speak. In particular, it was challenging to hear from individuals whose opinions were in opposition to my own. Additionally, the family dinner dynamics for some had a tendency to be too positive, owing to thirteen years of friendship (i.e. I had to listen attentively in order to include the differing opinions). As one of the founders of family dinner, the weekly dinners, for me, are more than an opportunity to interact with friends. Due to the close relationships I had developed not only with the participants of
this study, but also with the dinners themselves, even the appearance of objectivity was difficult to manage at times. The greatest hurdle for me, therefore, was to listen with an objective ear.

**Why Study Community?**

My desire to focus my research on this weekly dinner was generated from my own experience with placelessness. My lack of connection to people and places left me wandering, but I realized a sense of connection to Seminole Heights. According to Seamon & Sowers (2008), a sense of place cannot exist without an attachment made to it; I am attached to these dinners. These attachments are strong and lifelong. We all have places to which we make attachments. This experience of connecting prevents the disappearance of place from our lives and, perhaps more importantly, shows us the value of place.

During the course of this dissertation, I turn to a reflection of lived experience—a journey of loss, of searching, of finding—coupled with ethnographic observations of the family dinner event. It is through this journey that I move from my inward self to an “outward expression while working to take readers inside themselves and ultimately out again” (Denzin, 1997, p. 208). This journey challenges my internal feelings of the connections I have found to encourage the reader to examine his or her own internal feelings of connection and to be able to express those connections through the similarities of our stories—an act of reflexivity. Through this process, I show the relationship between finding place and participating in the weekly dinner event.

All individuals, despite their differences, have a common bond—we can make connections to the lived experiences of others that goes beyond a geographical location
through the stories we share. The autoethnographic aspect of this research project includes my story of loneliness and separation felt during my experiences of placelessness. I have been homeless four times in my past, and I have performed heterosexual for familial acceptance. My same sex attraction separated me from my birth family. Furthermore, this project details the sense of family I found through the connections made through food sharing. This sense of place is then connected to the data collection process of ethnographic observations and interviews. Additionally, my thirteen years of involvement in the community is also relevant to the research, since it informs how I came to interact and make connections with the participants of family dinner. Will the experience of placelessness make my observations of connections more noticeable or more forced? I ask this, because I have to consider if my desire for place “created” observations demonstrating that others have connected to family dinner or if the connections observed were an organic process that took place over time. This was a main concern of which I was acutely aware throughout the course of the research for this dissertation.

Others may make different connections than I made to place and food, but the connection has an equally powerful effect on each individual’s experience. According to Dewey (1984), a noted pragmatic philosopher, the effect of individual experiences is that they break “through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things…are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought” (p. 349). Such desire and thought have been the catalyst for the conversations begun over the sharing of a meal. By examining the means with which the deeper levels of life are touched, we are “reinhabiting the old in a way that will alter it” (Russo, 1994, p. 30) that allows for possible connections through the stories that we tell
and brings us “into the scene” (Ellis, 2004, p. 142). Readers can become so engaged that they experience what they are reading and “tap” into their “emotion, perception, and appreciation” (Dewey, 1984, p. 350) of the shared communal narrative of family dinner.

Interaction, reciprocity, and belonging all develop over time and are forged through attachment to place. Place matters in that places link us to our past. It is this link that allows us to appreciate place and prevents its disappearance from our lives (Altman & Setha, 1992). Altman & Setha (1992) further explained that place is how we connect meaning to our lived experience, a topic of particular interest to qualitative researchers. Rather than relying on abstract generalizations, lived experience relies on the unique nature of human interactions, situations, and experiences.

Placelessness is not only a loss of place, but also a loss of meaning associated with the experiences of place (Hayden 1995; Kunstler, 1993; Relph, 1976). It is this experience of place, I believe, to which Oldenburg (2000) referred when describing the purpose of third places.

The Guest List

While they may or may not be involved in the interviews and observations, all of the hosts of family dinner are part of this work. During the course of this study, I introduce seven (7) couples who host family dinner. Hosts, Mike and Vernon, usually host the second Wednesdays of the month and prepare the more exotic meals provided at family dinner. The first Wednesday hosts, Kevin and Mark, no longer host on a regular basis, but still host occasionally, entertain attendees on a screened-in patio that is quite pleasant on cooler nights. Cindy and John replaced Kevin and Mark in the regular rotation of hosts becoming the first heterosexual couple to host the event. Their time as a
host was short-lived, as they have also removed themselves from being one of the homes on the rotation list. To fill this vacancy, the first Wednesday dinners of each month rotate between volunteers until a permanent host is found. Ginger and Sam have volunteered to fill the fourth Wednesday, which had previously been vacated when Bradley and Robert separated and relocated outside of the neighborhood. Other past hosts presented in this dissertation are Peter and Scott who also separated and are no longer involved in hosting. Finally, Steve, my partner, and co-founder of this community event, and myself host the third Wednesday of the month. There appears to be a theme among the current and passed hosts—they do not fit into the traditional definition of family. The hosts are either homosexual, married with adult children who no longer live at home, or married without children.

Other guests include those who volunteered to be participants in this research. The first group consists of those who no longer attend or rarely attend family dinner. These guests fall into four categories of non-attendance:

1. They have moved out of state (Joseph and Franklin)
2. They have moved out of the neighborhood (Bradley and Jack)
3. They have started their own families and other priorities of these family units take precedence over attending (Harold and Beth; Lisa)
4. They have stopped attending due to personal/neighborhood conflict (Susan).

The next sets of guests are new/newer to the neighborhood. These guests enjoy weekly family dinners and want to give back to others for all that they have gained from attending. Sam and Ginger, along with Jacob and Robin, are some of the newer attendees of the family dinner. We do not see Jacob and Robin that often due to their work schedules, but they attend whenever they can.
The final sets of guests are those who have been in attendance for years. Sometimes they get left off the formal invitations because they know they are always invited to any function related to or stemming from family dinner. Cathy and Marc along with Steve and me represent some of the long-term guests of family dinner.

**Menu Preparation**

Individual items on a menu often can only be understood in relation to the whole menu. Menus, much like the sections of this dissertation, have breadth, richness, creative layout, and are representative of the samples contained within their pages. The progression of courses, as well as how they complement that which has already been consumed, is similar to the interdependent sections of this dissertation. The beginning sections outline its purpose, its benefits, and the motivations behind its inception.

While a connection to place was a strong motivation for choosing this dissertation topic of community and food, the dissertation also allows room for a discussion about lived experience and building upon already established connections with others. This dissertation focuses on how these interactions are strengthened through the weekly dinners in terms of increasing bonds of friendship that are nourished through food. It also considers how physical space and place allow for these interactions to occur.

Specifically, this study answers the following research questions:

1. How does food communicate a sense of community, of belonging, of connection, of place?

2. How do interactions with and within place(s) form strong friendship bonds, build social capital, and strengthen community?

3. How does family dinner supplement Oldenburg’s third place?
The dissertation is laid out in seven courses that integrate a combination of literature, ethnography, and autoethnography, all of which share the experience of family dinner. The final section is constructed as a post-dinner conversation, detailing the experiences of this research. The seven-course approach is appropriate for a dissertation with a primary focus on food. This menu format, however, necessitates that the literature review be woven into the description of the courses, rather than separated into its own chapter/course.

**Courses**

Course one discusses the history of food sharing at the weekly neighborhood dinners begun by my partner and me. The dinners grew quickly and became dubbed “Family Dinner” by attendees. In this first section, there is a detailed discussion of host homes and the timeline involved in creating a rotating schedule of hosts. Finally, the first course discusses the boundaries of invitation and hosting as dictated by geography and language. As the dinners make their way into the discussion, I use my thirteen years of experience in this community combined with the experience of other family dinner attendees to determine if there is a communal sense of place and stable community connections. The findings may reveal unique connections not originally anticipated when developing the research focus.

The second course discusses the use of “thick description” and the combination of autoethnography and ethnography. Using the ethnographic trope of the “impressionistic tale” (Van Maanen, 1988), I apply a first person approach to depict the experience of family dinner. Then, I gather information for the tale, which includes participant observation and personal and group interviews. The reflection on my personal
experiences and knowledge of the participants in relation to their personal accounts gathered through ethnographic methods creates a unique approach to the research project. Sifting through the information, however, presents an opportunity for ethical considerations, which are also discussed. Additionally, the unconventional format allows for the use of traditional research methods incorporated into non-traditional dissertations.

The third course begins with a discussion of food as a communicator. In this section, I explore the kinds of food brought to family dinner, and how food is an identifier that allows people to learn about others and their community (Counihan, 1999; Driver, 2008; Greene & Cramer, 2011). The cultural significance of food and the social obligations of participating in the family dinner event also surface. Eating “events” like this one can be seen as different points of discussion. For example, some attendees might discuss recipes, while others might discuss the personal significance of a dish. Still others may use food as an excuse to talk about topics not related to food at all. The third course not only illustrates what food communicates to the attendees of family dinner, but it also reveals how food represents culture.

Regarding the familial aspect of the dinners, the fourth course reveals how many attendees do indeed refer to each other as family. Family dinner provides a venue for forging close personal bonds with friends, or what Spencer & Pahl (2006) referred to as “a family of choice” (p.133). As with any family, there are differences of opinion that arise from time to time and cause minor disagreements. Disagreements do not create major conflicts, but rather create a feeling of “I need my space away from you for a while.” These absences are respected and forgiven. The fourth course also outlines the results of the observations and interviews regarding these established close personal bonds. These results focus on the “family” aspects of the dinners. While not all
attendees of the weekly dinner refer to participants as family, there is nevertheless a familial aspect to the shared dinner table conversations.

The fifth course introduces the concept of social capital—the mutually beneficial exchanges of services and/or knowledge in communities. While elements of social capital are available in every community, this study suggests that there needs to be a way to strengthen and increase the exchange of knowledge and services. The challenge of living in an individualistic society is to recognize how to contribute to a community, even one with which we are initially unfamiliar. By learning about a community, the benefits of social capital can not only be realized, but also used. Social capital (community networking) can be both a private good and a public good; it benefits both the participant and the nonparticipant alike (Putnam, 1995). Community networking benefits the participant through the assistance that is given/gained, and it benefits the nonparticipant by demonstrating the strength of the community in which they live. Social capital is about connections. The networks created through family and friends can pave the way for social capital for individuals as well as communities. Such an exchange of services and knowledge can additionally be used in a crisis, for profit, or for enjoyment (Fukuyama, 1995; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Social capital is brought to light as individuals participate in community activities, and the services and knowledge that different individuals can contribute is realized. Even so, there needs to be a sense of community among the stakeholders before the idea of community can be actualized. An important source of social cohesion, in terms of this study, is finding commonality among the participants of family dinner.

The rewards of participating in family dinner can be seen in further community involvement, whether it is by joining civic organizations or by participating in other
community events. It is the community involvement stemming from participation in the weekly dinners that I address in the sixth course. Looking at weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), the associations of dinner attendees with others that are not part of the social circle of the dinner guests is a way to expand the social capital of the community. Other neighborhood groups such as Book Club, Poker Night, Bicycle Club, and the Garden Club have splintered off from our family dinner night, which helps to increase community participation. Despite the positive connection of weak ties, Visser (1991) warned that inviting others into our homes is potentially dangerous. With so many different views and backgrounds collected under one roof, it is possible for disagreements to erupt. Fortunately, table manners and cultural upbringing have the potential to diffuse these disruptive possibilities. The rules of traditional dinner gatherings, at some level, state that we are in safe company. While we may have an issue with something or someone, disagreements are not generally voiced during dinner.

The seventh course reflects on the relationship of the literature on this subject to the lived experience of family dinner. Although a great deal of literature exists on the general topics of food, social capital, and bonding, little has been written on the ways that these concepts work together to build community. This course examines how ideas of community may or may not stray from the definition of community given by scholars (see Christensen & Robertson, 1980; Fukuyama, 1999; Jewkes & Murcott, 1996; MacIntyre, 1981).

In addition to the focus on community, in the seventh course I also investigate the relationships within the friendship network and how they influence personal and group ideas of community. The goal is to remain observant during the collection of my field
notes and allow space for the exploration of personal and friendship-based narratives in relation to the larger community.

“After Dinner Conversations” analyzes the struggle between how I may idealize the family dinners and how others describe the meaning family dinner holds for them. Since I am heavily vested in the family dinner event, an analysis is difficult to complete without a personal view; personal investment increases as a sense of protectiveness for the group increases. The descriptions that others give of family dinner may not correspond with my own paradigm, but are important to give a full understanding of the dinners. This is especially apparent as I examine the symbolic meaning of food within the frame of family dinner from the perspective of those who no longer participate in the weekly dinner events. I remain open, however, to others’ views and opinions of family dinner and allow these differing perspectives to challenge my own views of the dinners.

The group interview reveals the differing perspectives of participants. Following the methodology of Rawlins (2009), the group interview captures friendships and narratives as a co-constructed process of communication. Rawlins (2009) modeled this process through opening free-flow dialogues that reflect the friendship relationship already present within the attendees of family dinner. Taking a similar approach, the group interview focuses on individual and collective ideas of what family dinner means.

“Cordials,” the final section of the dissertation, provides a summation of the project. This section will reflexively look at participant views of family dinner in relation to my own experience, allowing for places where I choose to inject a personal thought/reaction to the work presented. The section illustrates how I use autoethnography in conjunction with ethnography to allow for this more reflexive approach. I will also discuss the ability of food to be used as a conduit for nourishing
community, and how the family dinner event might be continued via the newer participant’s involvement and leadership.
First Course

Appetizing Entre

The first family dinner, as participants quickly coined the event, consisted of five individuals who shared a meal of chili and cornbread. It all began on a Wednesday afternoon when my partner, Steve, and I were talking outside with our neighbor Lisa at the edge of the oak-lined street of our neighborhood. As we were talking, other neighbors, Mark and Samantha, who were walking their dog, stopped to join the conversation. It was a cool—or what Floridians would call chilly—night for that time of year. The date was March 15, 2000 and the temperature was approximately 60ºF with a slight breeze. As the topic turned to the cool weather, a conversation began about foods fitting for cooler temperatures.

“You know, my favorite food to eat when it is chilly is chili,” Steve shares enthusiastically.

Lisa gets excited and tags on to Steve’s comment, “And cornbread!”

“We love chili and cornbread!” Mark and Samantha exclaim in unison.

“That’s a great idea. Let’s have chili and cornbread. Everyone can come over to our house,” I interject. Steve gives me an approving nod for inviting our new neighbors over for dinner.

With little effort, we work out the details. Lisa goes home to make homemade sweet cornbread, Mark and Samantha offer to make a salad and bring a dessert, and Steve
and I volunteer to make the chili. Everyone is to come over at 7:30 p.m. for dinner. During the course of the meal and a few shared bottles of wine, we tell stories and laugh often, creating a closer bond with our neighbors. At the end of dinner, I suggest that we do this every week and it was agreed that a weekly dinner would be a wonderful way to improve neighborhood relations and give us all a nice break in the middle of the week. It wasn’t long afterward, as the dinners grew, that the closeness of the participants was realized and the gatherings became known as family dinner.

The Wednesday night dinners quickly became a beloved ritual that has extended beyond a decade. At the height of its popularity, over 100 neighbors attended. More recently, average dinners vary between 25 to 35 guests. Over a dinner of varied meats, vegetables, and desserts, neighbors learned more about each other in 2½ to 3 hours than they had in the years that they have been living next door to each other as mere residents. As the number of dinner attendees grew, so too did our familiarity with one another, thus creating strong bonds of friendship formed during the dinner ritual.

Family dinner, and food in general, facilitates communication between people because of its strong connection to ritual. Nunnery, Thomson, and Martzki (2000) discussed the connection of food to ritual and its use in community gatherings. Additionally, they detailed how rituals involving food build connections among people of different ages, lifestyles, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and socio-economic backgrounds. As a result, food connects us to one another. Levi-Strauss (1983) took this relationship one step further, characterizing food as a code that informs us about our social relationships. In other words, the social structure of food-based events, like family dinner, is embedded within the food that is shared.
Foods are more than items. The sharing of food is an event; it is a “…complex system of performance practices and epistemologies, food, cooking, and eating invite consideration into the rituals and practices that shape lived experience” (Lindenfeld & Langellier, 2009, p. 1). The participants of family dinner experience a familiar ritual that takes place at the same time each week, yet each experience is different from the week before. Every conversation, every story told, is linked to the experience of that moment in time and cannot be recreated. The lived experience of family dinner draws its meanings from a complex array of factors that are often overlooked. For instance, food and eating articulate links between the extended family ties of the participants of the weekly dinners to the greater community of Seminole Heights.

This study reinforces that familial bonds of community are expressed through the sharing of food. Specifically, this view of family dinner is thought to be one of the unique features of Seminole Heights. Cathy, a long time attendee of the weekly dinners, speaks to the unique quality of the weekly gatherings during our interview: “One of the reasons I think our neighborhood is so unique is, in part, because of the family dinners. Whenever I tell people about them, the response is always the same—That’s so great!” Then Cathy adds, “I wouldn't live anywhere else!”

While Cathy’s sentiment is shared by many of the attendees, the commitment to keeping the ritual of family dinner as that unique feature of Seminole Heights is made possible by the weekly hosts of the dinner event itself. Without the continued efforts of the weekly hosts, family dinner may not have survived in its current form all these years later. How is it possible that for 13 years the ritual of family dinner is still welcoming neighbors into the host homes?
Hosts

The rotation of four households hosting the weekly dinner with various volunteers picking up any 5th Wednesday has been the norm for 11 of the 13 years that the dinners have been a ritual in Seminole Heights. The schedule is posted on a community web site just in case anyone forgets where the event is held on any given week. Initially, the rotation was not in place at the beginning of family dinner. Like any ritual, there has to be a constant, consistent driving force behind the beginning stages until the routine becomes established and accepted as a ritual. Steve and I were behind the formation of the neighborhood dinners; we hosted every Wednesday for the first eighteen months in our 1200 square foot, 1920’s bungalow (see figure 1.1), and continued hosting most dinners for another six months before the weekly dinner event settled into its current rotation of homes

During the many years that we called that first house our home, it was well known throughout our neighborhood. The outside of the house was rather plain, yet the inside of the house was warm and inviting. The vibrant, rich colors and warm tones welcomed people into our home. During dinners, we often were told how comfortable people felt coming to our house because of the welcoming ambience that was established via the warm palette of the chosen decor. The size of the house was not conducive for entertaining large crowds of people, but we managed to accommodate even the largest number of attendees.

The kitchen was bright, cheery, and the largest room in the house; there was also a large deck off of the kitchen extending the space available for entertaining the weekly

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2 Steve and I no longer live in the house where family dinner started, but we still take our turn as one of the rotating hosts.
dinners, which were quickly growing to large numbers of attendees. That first dinner of five people soon expanded to an average of twenty-five to forty people within the first three months. The popularity of the dinners helped me to establish my family of choice, but the rapid growth made me realize that others were also in need of community.

FIGURE 1.1—Steve and David’s 1200 square foot, 1920’s bungalow (1st host house).

After 18 months, one other household began to host as well, but this was just for one Wednesday a month. The second host home belongs to Mike and Vernon. Their house is a traditional foursquare house with a centered front door and windows that are of the same size (typical of the architectural style), but missing the full-length front porch frequently found on foursquare homes (see figure 1.2). Despite the seemingly stark
façade (also white with grey trim, like our former home), their home also offers a warm and inviting atmosphere.

The expansive dining and living room combination of Mike and Vernon’s house is conducive to the growing crowds that have become the norm for family dinner. Mike and Vernon’s house also has a large back deck, which aids in the accommodation of the growing crowds. The kitchen is also conducive for hosting; it has a long island in the middle of the kitchen accessible from either side, making it easy to serve food. The houses are as much of a factor in the attendance as is the food; all the homes are warm and inviting, offering a feeling of comfort and care that invites friends, old and new, to relax and enjoy each others company.

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FIGURE 1.2—Mike and Vernon’s traditional foursquare house (2nd host house).

It took another six months for two other households to join in on the joys of hosting the neighborhood dinner. This began the practice of rotating Wednesdays between four main hosts with a volunteer host covering any fifth Wednesdays that occurred in a month. The third house to host belongs to Kevin and Mark. Kevin and Mark’s house is a 1920’s yellow brick bungalow (see figure 1.3). The home has an addition that was constructed to match the style of the existing home. The addition expanded the kitchen creating an open floor plan, which offers a more modern look with a great-room/kitchen/dining room combination. The French doors, off the great-room, open up to a screened and roofed patio area, which provides guests with extra dining space free of mosquitoes and other pests. In addition to the expanded great-room/kitchen and screened porch, the extended living room at the front of the house offers another, more private, eating and conversation space away from the typical noise of the kitchen.
The final house to be added to the original rotation was the home of Peter and Scott. Their lush landscape of their front yard makes their home a hidden jewel. The unassuming ranch style home is virtually unseen from the street because of the flourishing palms and native ground cover (see figure 1.4) hiding the addition of a master bedroom, and the tropical pool area of the backyard. The house is full of collectibles, conjuring up memories of childhood items long forgotten by most: the lunch box collection on display comes to mind. Due to the fragility of the collectibles, however, most preferred eating in the more relaxed atmosphere of the back yard where guests did not need to worry about accidentally spilling food or wine on a treasured and valuable item.

The interior of the home is like a museum. You want to touch, but you know that you should not. The openness of the galley kitchen makes it a perfect kitchen for hosting, as people never have to double back to exit. The line for food moves smoothly as guests
make their dinner choices and then retreat to the backyard oasis to visit with neighbors old and new.

FIGURE 1.4—Peter and Scott’s ranch style house (4th host house).

While the third and fourth original hosts have since dropped out of the rotation, other participants have volunteered to take their place. Peter and Scott became the first home to stop hosting, making way for Jack and Bradley to take on the responsibilities of being one of the hosts taking part in the rotating schedule.

Jack and Bradley renovated a Tudor style home (see figure 1.5). The kitchen was completely gutted and extensive work went into repairing the floors and redoing the bathrooms. The home’s entrance was through the living room with the exit to the backyard through the kitchen. It was difficult to navigate the kitchen because of the closed layout with the food line beginning and ending near the doorway between the
kitchen and the dining room. This configuration often bottlenecked the flow of traffic in and out of the kitchen. If you continued through the kitchen, however, solace could be found on the less crowded back porch.

After a breakup and a move, Bradley continued hosting in his new home—a 1920’s airplane bungalow (see figure 1.6) that he restored back to its original footprint by opening the front porch that had been enclosed. Bradley also maintained the original style of hardware and lighting fixtures throughout the house.

Bradley’s new home is much more conducive for hosting family dinner. The wrap-around front porch allows for multiple entryways in and out of the house. The kitchen has two doorways into the open dining area, which also helps to maintain a good flow as people gather to fill their plates with the evening meal. In addition, a large back deck off the kitchen as well as a street entrance to the deck allows for easier access to the
eating areas. The back deck also has a large dining table that sits eight to ten people comfortably and on cooler Florida nights it is usually the first area to be claimed by diners who want to enjoy the night air.

![Bradley’s airplane bungalow](image)

**FIGURE 1.6**—Bradley’s airplane bungalow (maintaining the 4th host house rotation).

With all the hosts settled back into a regular rotation again, Steve and I moved three miles south (out of the *boundaries* of Seminole Heights), but we continue, at the time of this writing, to host in our turn of the century 1905 Victorian style home (see figure 1.7) with its steep pitched roof and high ceilings adding to its spacious feel. Compared to the Bungalow where family dinner originated, our Victorian home offers much more space facilitating our ability to host the weekly dinner event.

Despite the larger space, almost everyone still seems to opt to congregate in the kitchen. While the kitchen is rather large, a center island diminishes its space, and it
becomes cramped trying to walk around the island with so many bodies occupying the limited space around it. As with the Bungalow, we tried to maintain an inviting color palette throughout our new home, using deep rich hues that are warm and soothing.

FIGURE 1.7—Steve and David’s Victorian style house.

When the weekly dinner rotation lost a second host home, Kevin and Mark’s, Cindy and her partner John picked up the hosting responsibilities, making them the first heterosexual couple to host family dinner. Cindy and John, like the same-sex couples that have hosted before them, are also in a non-traditional relationship. Perhaps it is something about acceptance and belonging to a group that is the driving force behind volunteering.

Cindy and John live in a Colonial style home (see figure 1.8) that went through major renovations under their direction. The back of the house was bumped out and the kitchen extended making it a large and more spacious location for serving. The adjacent
living room and den are separated by a staircase, which helps to divide the venue into smaller sitting areas making it comfortable to discuss topics in more intimate groups. As with many of the houses in the rotation, Cindy and John also have a large deck on the back of their house, which is often used for the dinners.

During the writing of this dissertation, Bradley sold his home and moved out of the neighborhood. He, unfortunately, is no longer a weekly host of the dinners. While we still maintain two of the original hosts, only one of the original host homes remains—Mike and Vernon’s. One of the newer attendees of family dinner, Ginger and her partner Sam, have graciously volunteered to join the rotation of hosts making them the second
heterosexual couple to host. They are currently renovating their back deck, however, and want to wait until that work is completed so as to ensure the safety of guests. This temporary lapse has left a vacancy in the rotation for the first time in nearly thirteen years. Since Ginger and Sam are not actually hosting at this time, I have not included a picture of their residence. At the time of this writing, the vacancy is being filled by a variety of volunteers. More often than not, those who host the fifth Wednesdays, when they occur, are also hosting the fourth Wednesdays as well.

Ginger and Sam also fall into the classification of non-traditional relationships, as they currently do not plan to have children, reinforcing the hypothesis that the drive to host comes from a desire for alternative familial relationships. Additionally, the other hosting couples have a stronger familial bond with one another and the core participants of family dinner. The hosts also do not have *traditional* family obligations that exist in mainstream heteronormative households.

Hosting and attending family dinner is a significant avenue through which to see friends and ensure a place in the social network of the neighborhood. Within contemporary society with all of the uprooted family structures, social networks are a way to sustain bonds of friendship. In recent months, there have been more changes regarding hosts; the need for more volunteers has revealed the difficulty of finding permanent hosts to take part in the rotating schedule. Several attendees live in smaller houses and consider their space too small to entertain, or they simply do not have a desire to host despite their enjoyment in attending the weekly dinners.

Successful home entertaining relies in part on the layout and décor of family homes. In addition to the inviting atmosphere of the home, there needs to be a capable host. The people that are able to host dinner parties have a desire to be an active member
of the community, and they are willing to allow friends and other community members entry into their home. Having large and spacious indoor areas, including a dining room with a large table, a separate kitchen, and another room in which to have appetizers aids in the ability to host. Due to the warm climate of Florida, hosting is able to take place outside, whether it is in garden areas or around pools. Additionally, the location of the home is also used as a preventative reason for not hosting the weekly dinners, which relates back to the idea of borders and their effect on hosting and/or attending family dinner. There is a concern that if a home is not within the geographical borders of Seminole Heights that others will not attend. Steve and I were the first host home outside the borders of Seminole Heights, but as founders of the ritual and long-time hosts, this geographical barrier has been overlooked by most.

Maintaining friendships and social networks while balancing the demands of work responsibilities is difficult. Despite the time and energy involved, there is also an expressed feeling of satisfaction that comes with hosting a successful family dinner as a high quality meal is considered a gift to friends. Both skill and care are demonstrated when hosts cater to guests’ special diets, such as when extra vegetarian items are provided in addition to the main meal. Hosts are rewarded when guests appreciate the effort involved in organizing the weekly dinner event.

Observations

Guests begin arriving around 7:30 p.m. and roughly around 8:30 p.m. every Wednesday evening the call for dinner is made. The flatware is conveniently placed at the edge of a counter alongside plates and napkins. A line is formed and attendees continue conversations as the line moves along the length of the counters that display
various meats, vegetables, and desserts. As plates are filled, I often get dessert first so that I don’t miss out on one of the homemade dishes. Then seats are taken anywhere that they can be found.

The large number of guests that began attending the dinners presented a challenge. Groups of eighty to one hundred attendees necessitated changes in host responsibilities. Initially, the host house would provide the main meal and attendees would bring appetizers, side items, salads, and desserts. As the popularity of family dinner grew, the crowd became too large for the host homes to be responsible for serving.

The hosts met to discuss the issue of costs, often surpassing $300.00, associated with hosting, and they decided that they should not be responsible for feeding so many people. A general announcement was made that each attendee assume a greater responsibility for the main course asking each household bring enough food to feed a larger percentage of the attendees. While it was never brought to anyone’s attention, some attendees had only been bringing a 99¢ bag of chips, for example. The new policy prevented such small contributions, but did so without pointing fingers or making others feel guilty. Over time the numbers began to decrease to a more manageable group. There are about forty-five people in attendance tonight, November 14, 2012, although the general number of attendees varies between twenty and thirty-five people.

As friends and guests make their way through the line of food, the choices are greater due to the higher number of attendees. On the table are four different chicken dishes—fried chicken, hot wings, baked chicken marinated in Italian dressing, and a crock pot containing rice and chicken; multiple vegetable choices—asparagus, green beans (or string beans), corn, and squash casserole; and too many desserts to mention. The desserts are mostly store bought and are generally indicators of someone arriving late
from work and only having time to stop at the local grocer to pick up something along the way. However, there are some homemade cupcakes and a pound cake with fresh fruit and homemade whipped cream. As people fill their plates, they make their way around the house to find a place to sit down and enjoy the meal. With the larger numbers, several people share their chairs or take turns sitting and eating.

It is not uncommon at family dinner to approach someone you don’t know and engage in a conversation. Tonight is no exception. There are some new attendees at dinner tonight, although they have lived in the neighborhood for a while. They had heard of the weekly dinners from different neighbors and at some neighborhood meetings. The invitation to attend had been extended to them several times, but it was not until tonight that they had been able to work the dinner into their schedule. They are welcomed as new members and encouraged to attend any future dinners. The invitation is only extended once. After the first attendance, there is a standing invitation to return.

The conversations are typically kept on a superficial level. When other hosts offered their homes for the dinners, we (the hosts) met to discuss a few basic “rules” about the dinners. The only major decision made that night was that we decided that the dinner gatherings would not be a platform to promote personal or political agendas. In fact, during the 2004 mayoral campaign, all of the major political figures running for office had heard about and asked to attend a family dinner. We were honored both as hosts and as active members of our community, but it was made clear to all of the Mayoral candidates that their attendance was expected to be purely meet and greet—no campaigning. Limiting conversations though can have unwanted consequences—they can be dull. Several veteran attendees have mastered a more light hearted approach to “shoulder surfing,” which means, instead of looking over someone’s shoulder to steal
personal information, you constantly look over the shoulder of the person to whom you are talking to assess if more interesting-looking conversations are going on among other attendees—in which case, you simply excuse yourself and join another conversation.

Steve is walking around the house tonight and he is a skilled shoulder surfer. He is not engaging in conversation yet; he is testing the waters. As he approaches Cathy and Wendy who are already engaged in conversation, Cathy stops mid-sentence and looks at Steve with a smile.

“Just keep on walking. We aren’t discussing anything that you would find interesting. So don’t waste your time.”

“You know me too well,” says Steve with a smile.

“Indeed.” Cathy winks at Steve and continues where she left off in her conversation with Wendy as Steve continues to wander around the house to the next conversation.

I follow Steve into the area staged for drinks. This is a small room off of the kitchen that contains wine refrigerators and an icemaker. Two conversations are taking place. The first is about Poker Night (generally a monthly get together where conversations are limited and serious card playing takes place). Although women are allowed to attend Poker Night, it is understood to be mostly a men’s event. Not being a poker player, I did not understand “down the river” and other terms, so I tune into the other conversation, which is about Book Club. Oh, pleasure reading! I barely recall the last time I’ve read “for pleasure,” but I live vicariously through the conversation. Like Poker Night, Book Club is open to anyone, but it is more of a women’s event. A Book Club for more “manly” reading was formed, but it did not stand the test of time and such books are now simply recommended to others, and discussed whenever there is a social
gathering instead of a planned meeting. These extensions of the weekly dinners demonstrate the value in social networking and add to the connections to place that have been made possible by sharing a meal.

**Gathering Places**

Often gatherings that occur within communities take place at bars, coffee houses, or some other type of *third place* (Oldenburg, 2000). For the residents of Seminole Heights, there were no gathering places within a reasonable distance of the neighborhood. While it is feasible to assume that other social gatherings could have formed relationships such as those created by attendance at the weekly dinners, the lack of third places would have made it difficult to create such close bonds of friendship. Family dinner, from observations, interviews, and my own personal experience, was the catalyst for the conversations that led to realizing mutual interests. The events mentioned that stemmed from family dinner participation, like playing poker or reading novels, may never have been started if not for discussions around the dinner table that allowed for these types of connections (Visser, 1991).

**Boundaries**

While a welcoming environment from hosts helps to encourage attendance at family dinner, different ideas of boundaries are at play within this study. The word boundary may refer to a demarcation determining the limits of an area or the greatest possible degree of something, but that meaning is limiting. For family dinner, the limitations have to do with the geographical location of the homes and who can attend family dinner. The geographical boundaries of Seminole Heights (the neighborhood in
which the dinners take place) represent, to a degree, who can host the weekly event. Likewise, the geographical boundaries are also representational of who can attend family dinner.

Initially, it was an unwritten understanding that attendees of family dinner were to be residents of Seminole Heights and people only invited other neighbors. Over time people who attended on a regular basis would mention that they had told friends about the weekly dinners, and their friends wanted to attend. The invitation would be extended and new friends and community members become a part of the weekly tradition of breaking bread within the friendship network created through/by family dinner.

These “outside” members extended the geographical reach of community beyond the borders of Seminole Heights. The progression of attendees outside of the Seminole Heights borders makes perfect sense to the progression of what it means to be a part of a community. After all, the tradition of family dinner started in a smaller quadrant of Seminole Heights referred to as Hampton Terrace and quickly spread across the freeway to include all areas of Seminole Heights as well as a few of the nearby neighborhoods.

The city plat maps become a different way to define the “community” of Seminole Heights by defining community as planned geographical areas. When defining community, “we have to question the significance we might be inclined to attach to structural forms [of community] and seek, instead, the meanings imputed by their members” (Cohen, 1985 p. 40). Even though the majority of members are residents of one of the four quadrants that comprise the over 9,000 households in the greater Seminole Heights neighborhood, Hampton Terrace has subsequently seceded from the Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association and formed its own neighborhood association—Hampton Terrace Neighborhood Association (HTNA). The separation came about chiefly due to a disagreement over seeking a local historic designation (LHD).
Heights area, the attendees of the dinner events consider all attendees as part of their community whether those in attendance actually live within the city-defined boundaries of the greater Seminole Heights area or not.

Another boundary that weaves in and out of the discussion of family dinner night is the term *family*. Before moving forward, a basic terminological point needs to be made regarding my use of this term. Like all words, the word *family* is limited in its capacity to name all of our accepted views of what the word itself means. Often when “attention is being focused on eating in the private domain, there is a widespread assumption that this involves examining...the nuclear family” (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 97). The nuclear family, however, is only one type of family.

“The concept of the traditional family, that is, the ‘natural reproductive unit’ of mom, pop, and the children all living under one roof, is not an Immutable one. It is a social construct that varies from culture to culture and, over time, the definition changes within a culture” (Ball, 2002, p. 68). Parallel definitions of familial makeup also reach across the divides of race, religion, and sexuality (Baca Zinn, Eitzen, & Wells, 2008). For the purpose of this discussion, I refer to family as extended family—those with whom close personal ties have been developed, creating a familial feel to the relationship (Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

In Seminole Heights, the majority of the residents are single (Single also represents gay and lesbian couples who are in committed relationships, but who are not allowed to marry in Florida at the time of this dissertation). Only 45% of the residents in the neighborhood live in a recognized heterosexual marriage. Of the 45% of married couples, less than half have children (although, several are now planning to start
families). The traditional nuclear family makes up only 23% of the neighborhood\textsuperscript{4}. While there are married couples with children who attend family dinner, the children are older and live independently outside of the parents’ residence. Of the few families with children that attend the weekly dinners, only one is from a household with both parental figures present, positioning the vast majority of attendees outside of what society would deem a traditional family.

The majority of attendees, however, are in committed long-term relationships. The distinction of family has implications beyond this research project, which I plan to pursue in a later research project. For the purpose of this dissertation, I continue to examine the ways in which food can be used to forge familial ties across the boundaries of representations of community.

\textsuperscript{4} Statistics taken from Zillow.com
Second Course

Mixing It Together

Bringing a dissertation together is like preparing a salad. You have to find what ingredients work best to suit what you want to present. The most important part of the preparation is determining what goes together—both stylistically and structurally. The unconventional format allowed for a great amount of latitude. Any time I try to follow a very strict regimen or structured set of instructions it becomes a recipe for disaster. My dissertation is no different. The more I try to follow a recipe, the more I find myself trying to force my work into a mold that is too limiting. The freedom allowed through my chosen method of writing allows me to express the impact of my research on me personally and on those who contributed to its content.

I expected my words to fit into a pre-made template. When they did not, I struggled with the concepts I was trying to get across due to an initial tendency to force my own views into information that I had collected from my study participants. As I struggled with the information, I became more dissatisfied with the progress of my research. In order to address my initial tendency of thinking I already knew what others meant, I needed to step back, relax, and refocus my attention on the larger project instead of dissecting my work into fragmented bits and then trying to reassemble all the pieces so they fit into my own views. This chapter explains the concepts and the decisions I made to understand them apart from my own personal views.
Auto/Ethnography

In this heading I use a slash (/) to show the blending of both autoethnography and ethnography to work through the concepts I noticed as I studied the sharing of food with others. I use impressionistic tales (Van Maanen, 1988) in order to write the blended accounts of the self (autoethnography) and observations (ethnography) as first person stories depicting an event (family dinner) that happens in the field where the author is an active participant in constructing the story. According to Geertz (1973), ethnography is a process to use “our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those” (p. 15). Through the ethnographic methods of group observations, personal narratives, and a group interview, I blend my own understanding of how food is a communicator and creator of community via observed behaviors and habits. By joining my participants in the relaxed environment of family dinner, the stories of my participants are discovered through observation, and recreated through what Van Maanen (1988) referred to as “impressionistic tales” as I blend the participants tales with those of my own.

The “impressionistic tale” also integrates the researcher into the narrative rather than segregating the researcher, which allows the researcher to reference the self, and allows the reader “to see, hear, and feel as the fieldworker saw, heard, and felt” (Van Maanen, 1998, p. 103), which serves to write an autoethnographic account into the ethnographic observations. The integration of the researcher adds to the collaborative nature of telling a story by giving the reader the opportunity to make his or her own connections to and interpretations of the experience being described (Bochner & Ellis, 2003). By blending the personal nature of autoethnography and the observed nature of ethnography and integrating myself as researcher, I show how connections to the
narratives collected relate to individual experiences. In the case of family dinner, the narrative is a depiction that expands the sense of the cultivated community. In other words, community did not just occur; community was fostered and nourished through the sharing of food as told by the blended stories of self and other.

Ethnography allows for the presentation of observations that show the effect of food sharing on community building. The combination of autoethnography with ethnography is also a way to present experiences as a topic of investigation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Gannon, 2006). When I compare my views of family dinner with the views of others, I engage in deeper analysis of what the dinners mean to me via the meanings that are shared by others. Through investigation, the story becomes a way for readers to make sense not only of themselves but of others as well (Adams, 2008; Bochner, 2002). The telling of personal experience (see Poulos, 2008; Purnell, 2013; Tillmann, 2009) serves as a representation to which readers can connect and empathize through their own lived experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For instance, when I write that family dinner saved me, the reader can think of events in his or her life when an event or event(s) saved them from taking a different path.

Engaging with my community allowed me to incorporate an auto/ethnographical (the combination of both autoethnography and ethnography) narrative that supports ethnographic observations made. In this way, the details of family dinner became more than a story—the details became a contextualized sharing of human experience. The stories of family dinner represent different things for different people. Bateson stated that “our species...learns through stories” (1994, p. 11). Stories reflect the experiences of life back to the reader as lessons learned. Ethnography/autoethnography reveals in that reflection the challenges of negotiating life in a way that makes the difficulties easier for
readers to understand and to relate (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Auto/ethnography opens the
door for personal inquiry (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992; Bochner, 1994; Ellis & Bochner,
2000) and discovery (Goodall, 2000). It is through this inquiry that the relationship
between the socially constructed world and the personal experience of relating are
established (see Ellis, 1991).

Permissions and Protections

Before I was able to begin the data collection process, I addressed issues
regarding participant consent, privacy, and identity. From the beginning, I took measures
such as keeping all documents involving participants’ identities secured and followed
measures as directed by the University of South Florida Internal Review Board (IRB). I
ensured that this study met the human subjects guidelines outlined by the IRB and I made
a concerted effort to do my best in preserving the privacy and identity of the participants
involved in this research study.

First, I obtained verbal permission from all family dinner participants to allow
observations since they were general in nature and did not mention any names of those I
observed outside of the participants who were also interviewed and had signed informed
consents already. I obtained permissions easily from all participants that volunteered.
The participants were either personal friends or at least friendly with me. One of the
interviews conducted revealed the participant felt that friendships were lost not only with
me, but also with others in the neighborhood due to conflicts that took place in the
neighborhood. My relationship with this one interviewee was more that of an
acquaintance, neither friendly nor adversarial.
I keep the signed consent forms securely in a stand-alone home safe, and the names of all participants have pseudonyms. While I did my best to protect the participants’ names, there remains contextual data that makes identities of some participants apparent. For example, some of the stories revealed are readily known by many of the attendees of family dinner. Anyone from the dinners will recognize the source of some of the stories. The decision to keep such contextual data was based on the need to situate my research in such a way so as to not compromise the data’s integrity by using the actual city and neighborhood in which the dinners are held.

Some of my participants plan to be at my defense, which renders “my participants vulnerable to each other, and to other[s]…they know (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 744) as this will be the first time that they hear each other’s stories. Additionally, Cassell (1977) noted, “When research subjects form part of the investigator’s audience, questions of privacy take on a new salience” (p. 413). I still used the pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants of my research. Despite the use of pseudonyms, the possibility of the discovery of participants’ identities was stated clearly to all participants, as was the fact that withdrawal from the study remained an option at any time.

**Gathering the Material**

Once the permissions were obtained and protections put into place, I began the process of collecting the data. As I went through this process I used my autoethnographic accounts to explore the ethnographical information that I gathered. I also used the ethnographical accounts to contextualize my autoethnographical experiences by comparing my own experiences of family dinner with the experiences of others.
The fieldwork from the weekly diners told many stories; stories that revealed a way of living (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Feldman, 2002), a representation of events (Ellis, 1993; Herman, 2005; Purnell, in press), and a method of inquiry (Bell, 2002; Bochner & Ellis, 2003; Richardson, 2007). By layering my own interpretation of my actions and the other participants’ actions during family dinner night, and by placing in tandem my own narrative with the narrative of the other participants of family dinner, I was better able to answer my research questions. The collection of data detailed in the following section explains how I employed group participant observation, personal interviews, and a group interview to find answers to my research questions.

**Participant Observations**

I developed a guideline for conducting the observations (Appendix 4), which took place at the weekly dinners. As I observed participants of family dinner, I was mindful of Mary Catherine Bateson’s statement⁵ that “to be a skilled ethnographer, you have to notice yourself noticing.” I noticed myself noticing the stories shared over a meal. Participants in attendance at family dinner learned about each other through the process of telling emergent narratives from within larger conversations that took place around the dinner table. This, in turn, allowed me to tease out the narratives from the participants’ view (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Shank, 2002).

Stories that I observed others telling enriched lives and made “experiences [of family dinner] meaningful” (Bochner, 2002, p. 73). The stories also brought about spontaneous discourse (Ochs & Capps, 2002) that presented an environment where everyone felt “more or less equal to each other” (Rawlins, 1992) instead of focusing on

⁵ From a lecture given April 10, 2012 at the University of South Florida
differences, creating closer bonds of friendship. The conversations were spontaneous and were described as coming about due to the “immediacy of presence” (Cissna & Anderson, 1994). Immediacy of presence refers to what is taking place at the moment. It is this sharing of stories that I observed at the dinner table which created the atmosphere for discussions (Symons, 2007) regarding the building of community.

As a full participant in the weekly dinners, I needed to have a sense of “…intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the 'space' created by this distance that the analytical work of the ethnographer gets done” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 103). Hammersley & Atkinson (1983) further stated, “without such analytical space, the ethnography can be little more than the autobiographical account of a personal conversation” (p. 103). I, therefore, listened during my observations in order to obtain answers to questions I did not even consider during the interviews (Whyte, 1984, p. 303), and then wrote the field-notes in a style representing common fieldwork in ethnography (Van Maanen, 1998, p. 24). I wrote the field notes in private after the observations so as to not disturb or interrupt my observations.

The field notes, while incorporating observations of food as a communicator, also worked to establish a context through which I situated the content of the interviews in conjunction with observations made. Within my own experience of family dinner, I considered the research questions and how they related to my understandings of the participants’ experience (see Appendix 5).

**Personal Interviews**

Through the process of interviewing, I looked at the participants’ perceptions/understandings. Jorgenson (1991) gave heed to such relationships in the
interview process when she stated, “For the analyst whose task is making sense of subjects’ responses, some awareness of how those subjects construct the interview is crucial” (p. 211). By having the participants talk about their experience, it was my desire to have them be more open and lost in their own thoughts when recollecting past events. In this way, they were more present as they shared their understandings of family dinner and, hopefully, not so focused on what they thought that I wanted to hear (see Jorgenson, 1991).

To find participants for the interview, I applied my own variation of what Keyton (2001) referred to as network sampling. I already knew the attendees of family dinner. Instead of asking for individuals to participate, I discussed my research topic during the dinners themselves. People attending came to me and asked if they could contribute to my dissertation in some way. After gaining several participants in this fashion, I then inquired if those that approached me to participate heard of anyone else who expressed a desire to participate. Several of the attendees who came to me stated that they discussed their decision with others at family dinner. Through these conversations, I learned of two others who were willing to participate in the research study. I used this method because I did not want my friends to participate simply due to a perceived obligation to have to “help me out.”

Once the interviews were set, we met either at my home or at the home of the interviewee. Participants signed the consent form (Appendix 1), and I started the digital recorder placing it on a nearby table. The questions (Appendix 2) helped to expand the focus of the dissertation through a narrative approach, which engaged a response that portrayed the emotion of the moment described. Bruner (1990) placed the narrative in time, to “assume an experience of time” rather than just making
reference to historical accounts when recalling an event from the past. It is this experience of time that I sought to draw out from the participants of the study during the interview process. By so doing, the participants were more in-touch with their thoughts as they shared their understandings of family dinner. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed.

The interviews became a process for gathering information through the different accounts that participants gave during the interview. This method helped develop a story told by multiple individuals, revealing how we interact with others to create meaning in our lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted that, "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives” (p. 2). People’s lives consist of stories that they share during the interview process. The stories told are then used to connect the participants of family dinner through the similarities discovered.

**Group Interview**

The purpose of the group interview was to gather more specific data on the formation, history, and purpose of the weekly dinners. I gained insight into how these social gatherings facilitated friendship networks and promoted community involvement. The group interview took place at the private residence of one of the hosts. Participants were contacted in person to set-up the interview at the designated location. I also sent email reminders two days prior to the interview.

I informed the interviewees of the option to withdraw, the purpose of the research, the procedures for the interview, and gave them the opportunity to ask any questions before the interview began. After obtaining permissions for the interview and having the
consent forms (Appendix 1) signed, the recording of the interview began. After letting the interviewees know that I was recording the interview, I placed the recorder out of view in order to keep participants at ease. Impromptu follow up questions were asked to further explain responses given by the interviewees.

Similar to the goal of Rawlins (2009), the group interview captured friendships and narratives as a co-constructed process of communication. Rawlins (2009) described this process as opening the structure to facilitate free-flow dialogue. Free-flow dialogue is what King (1994) referred to as an open response interview or what is considered using semi-structured questions (Warner & Karner, 2010). The open response process triggered participants to take part in the interaction along with me as a co-producer of the interview process (see Fontana & Frey, 2005). The questions were pre-set (Appendix 3), but structured so that additional questions were integrated into the interviews as other ideas or concepts arose during the interview process.

Often during the course of the interview, participants made a statement that took the conversation in a different direction from the pre-set questions. These tributary divergent discussions that branched off from the questions added more detail and nuanced experiences that enriched the interview. It was fine for this to take place, since I wanted the participants to be as much a part of this process as possible. Once the conversations that branched off from my pre-set research questions began to wind down, I went back to the original questions. The goal reached was an open dialogic space for the exploration of personal and friendship based narratives in relation to food, friendship ties, social capital, and community.

I found it interesting during the group interview that I seldom had to refer back to my research questions. Even when the conversation went in a different direction, the
participants of the group interview brought the conversation back to another point that I wanted to cover without me having to guide them to do so. The interviewees self guided return to the questions I wanted to ask was indicative of the strong connections created among the participants of family dinner over the years.

**Transcribing**

I thought that transcribing my interviews would be the easiest part of the dissertation process. After all, I was simply typing out the words that I heard. As stated, one of the struggles I had was listening to the views of others. I had projected my own importance of family dinner unto others, but I learned that not everyone had the same views of the weekly meals. Transcribing the participants’ words made them more permanent. Once they were on the page, they were more real for me. During the interviews, I had to listen; during the transcribing, I had to hear. Hearing their words made me realize that I was not always truly listening. I read the words over many times before beginning the coding process.

**Coding**

After transcribing the interviews and observations, I sat down to code the data. Coding the data required me to abstract related data in order to develop the concepts that were used for the research. The compilation and interpretation of components or fragments of ideas/experiences, which were recorded, observed, and coded, created the "blueprint” of family dinner. Themes that emerged from the participants' stories were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of our collective experience. According to Leninger (1985), the "…coherence of ideas rests with the [researcher] who has
rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked" (p. 60).

When I conducted my observations, I not only looked at the verbal interactions, but also the nonverbal interactions such as facial expressions and gestures. By looking at the nonverbal communication, I was given another aspect of the family dinner event that may or may not have been revealed in the day-to-day interactions of the attendees. This process gave me a wider view or way of seeing the data that were collected when coded from my observations.

From the transcribed interviews, I coded the descriptions and conversations in order to analyze and develop themes that emerged to “…offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The emergent themes combined with, and compared to, the coherent ideas that surfaced from the interview process were supported by the available literature on food, friendship ties/close bonds, and social capital showing their connections to building community.

**Thick Description**

The themes that emerged from the coding were then written out using Geertz’ (1973) “thick description.” One of the strong points of the ethnographic theory of Geertz was his belief that written ethnographic observations are not a plain and factual documentation but an interpretation, or, what later came to be known as thick description—how ethnographers record their observations of a phenomenon they have seen and translate them into interpretations. I followed the principle of thick description
not only during my observations, but also when I weaved my observations into the coded results of my interviews.

In order to understand the power of food as a creator and communicator of community, I established the culture of the shared event of breaking bread with neighbors by using the definition of culture by Geertz (1973): culture “is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described” (p. 9). The family dinner event allowed the connectivity needed to create a thick description of personal lived experiences. Thus, the family dinner ritual was not a physiologically driven process, but rather a cultural interaction.

Through this research, I investigated not only the varied purposes for attending family dinner, but also the attendees’ interpretations of their participation. I revealed the similarities and differences among those who attended regularly, those who attended more infrequently, and those who had stopped attending in order to try to make sense of the phenomenon known as family dinner. Morgan, Frost, and Pondy (1983) discussed how “individuals [create] images of a wider reality, in part to rationalize what they are doing” (p. 24).

In order to facilitate a thick description of the family dinner ritual, I made observations, conducted personal interviews in conjunction with the group interview, and I added a reflexive account of my own experience of the family dinner ritual. As others explained/described their experiences, I gave their accounts full attention as they detailed their accounts of family dinner.
Framing

An understanding of how framing was needed in order to use sensemaking. Bateson (1954) and Goffman (1974) understood frames to be our conceptualization of particular situations. According to Goffman, frameworks presented “what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (p. 21). Individuals’ motives determine which social frameworks are to be considered during an exchange. In other words, framing is a reciprocal function (Bateson, 1954; Goffman, 1974).

Framing is also a communicative act—a dialogue between or among participants, which heightens awareness of the perceptions of the participants of family dinner as to how they view the weekly event. Framing, in this sense, prepared not only the participants of this study, but me as well, for what we were going to hear, and how we were to respond (Bateson, 1954). In this interactional view, frames established the dialogue that took place among the participants (Gonos, 1977). The conversational style created an environment for co-constructing meaning making a frame an interpretive and reciprocal tool to make better sense in the co-constructing process.

After working with the data and understanding the frame in which the data was given and received, I used the information to construct my own narrative using such conventions as scene and plot as they related to the stories that were heard in my observations and given in the interviews. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) discussed how research “is a collaborative document, a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant" (p. 12). It is this collaborative effort that I wanted to bring out of the research data collected in order to produce a narrative that

**Reflexivity**

In addition to the sense making process, the methods chosen oriented my own reflexive view of how to present the data (see Tierney & Lincoln, 1997). Reflexivity was an essential element of this research project (see Glesne, 1999). I told a story of my lived experience (autoethnography) in relation to the ethnographic data that I collected. This was in the form of what Tedlock (1991) referred to as narrative ethnography, where the story is “perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story” (p.77). It was important to reflect on my own actions and how those actions related to the world around me (Brookefield, 2005).

It is this reflexive, introspective nature of my research that reached beyond simply being a personal narrative. Agar (1980) suggested that qualitative researchers should concentrate on intensive personal involvement. Such involvement makes connections possible for reflexivity on issues beyond an individual life; it takes the personal and uses it to understand larger experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Agar (1980) and Spradley (1979) discussed being immersed in and understanding of the researched community, but in order to understand the narratives of others I needed to be reflexive of my role in the research community and recognize my positionality towards the individual stories of my participants during the sense-making process.

In general, each method approached the main research question regarding food as a communicator and builder of community. These methods accessed a variety of data to address ideas of how food fosters relationships, builds social capital, and encourages
community involvement. Through this auto/ethnographic study, I showed that the sharing of a meal created close personal bonds and became the primary avenue through which community involvement gained personal and communal significance.

Spradley (1979) stated that researchers should be searching for the meaning that participants make of their lives, and Eisner (1991) added that for qualitative studies to be helpful to the reader that the work must bring the reader to an understanding, make future applications of the reading, and serve as a guide for the reader to notice aspects of life that may go unnoticed. As I learned from my participants, I also have given readers the information necessary to come to an understanding of food as a communicator and builder of community. The reader will be able to make future applications to other ideas and expressions of community. Finally, the readers will be left with a guide for the importance of this research project that otherwise may have gone unnoticed.

It is through my friendships, the dialogue that I heard during my ethnographic observations, and my own autoethnographic accounts of family dinner that spoke to the degree of intimacy reached through the sharing of a meal. While food did not create the friendships themselves, food set the foundation that made the development of the close personal bonds possible and sustainable. It is the closeness of my relationships with the participants of my research that created new ways for me to understand my experiences with family dinner and further understand myself.

**Ethical Considerations**

Using autoethnography in combination with ethnography helped me reveal the closeness that I shared, and still share, with many of the participants of this study. Although I am close to this community, I did not see my closeness as a hindrance, but
rather a connection that allowed for enhanced rapport, and the ability to engage in a different way of framing situations revealed by participants, the details of which I already formed from my own framework.

Whyte (1955) additionally stated that we could not know how to study our research until we had been in the field for a few years. I have thirteen years of experience with my research site. Not only am I close to the community I research, many of the community members are also close to me. The level of familiarity with my study was an added benefit of researching my own community. The trust instilled in me, as a researcher, was not possible without the level of saturation I achieved in the every day lives of my research participants. The relationship that I have with the participants of this study allowed for them to reveal more intimate details at different stages in the research process. Such intimate details were apparent during the one-on-one interviews—our closeness gave them a greater sense of ease, which can be both a positive and a negative. Nukunya (1969) added to this discussion when he described doing research within his own community. “Because I was one of them and not a ‘foreign intruder,’ …they had confidence in me…Many a time informants were met who admitted ‘this is a thing we normally don’t divulge…but since it is you we shall give you all the necessary help” (p. 19).

Although the benefits of studying your community can potentially enhance the trust and level of information obtained, possible dangers can also surface in researching close friendships within your research group. I had to be careful of over-familiarity (see Cummings, 1985; Measor & Woods, 1991) and watch my propensity to make assumptions due to that over-familiarity. Additionally, I had to be aware of how my knowledge of family dinner was not necessarily representative of the overall view of the
other participants. Instead, I had to listen carefully and evaluate what the participants of this study were expressing when I conducted interviews and observed them during the weekly dinners. Furthermore, my friends, who were part of my research, might have felt like they owed me, wanted to help me, or were concerned about giving me the wrong response. I needed to watch for these potential dangers, and be prepared to meet these anticipated, as well as, unforeseen dangers of researching one’s own community.

Many of the observations made by Tillmann-Healy (2003) with regards to friendship as method apply to the personal nature of my friendships within my research group. Entering my research as a friend and researcher adds to that relational element through the “conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability” (p. 734). For example, I was asked to keep things off record during some of the interviews, but this added to the friendship bonds. Tillmann-Healy reported, “When asked, [researchers] keep secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research” (p. 735). Trusting me with personal information is a testimony of the close bonds of friendship strengthened through my founding and hosting of family dinner. In addition to trust, “when we approach research as an endeavor of friendship, the emergent texts can have additional benefits for participants including self-understanding and acceptance” (p.739).

**Dual Roles**

While my role of friend allowed me easier access to my research community, my role as researcher was, at times, at odds with my role as friend. This is not a community that I entered into friendships through my dissertation. This was my community before the dissertation, and I found myself wanting to protect my participants and keep them in
the best possible standing. One aspect that was of specific interest was the stance that I took as an ethnographer of my close personal friends as they took part in this research project. It was difficult to not make mental notes when their narrative varied from my expectations of what I thought I knew about their narrative. I had to assert my researcher role and listen to their narrative. Listening as a researcher is quite different than listening as a friend. As a researcher, I also had to make sure that my participants were not attempting to give me what I wanted to hear. Jorgenson (1991) commented that the researcher needed to be aware of his or her role as researcher compared to the perceived understanding of his or her role by those that are researched and vice-versa.

Platt (1981) reminded us that one of the main problems of researching peers is the role that is presented. I remained cognizant of my relationship to my community and the participants in my researched group, while also recognizing my knowledge of the research participants and the persona that they may or may not have wanted to present to me as a researcher. Multiple roles and positions were at play between those whom I researched and myself (Chapman, 2007; Tillman, 2002), and these roles were crucial to understanding my perspective of the research participants. I also realized my positionality in relation to my research—how my views had an effect on my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). My dissertation is not an account about some of the residents of Seminole Heights who participated, or still participate, in the family dinner event; it is a collaboration made with some of the residents of Seminole Heights. The collaboration involved in the storying of family dinner places me within my own experience making me both the researcher and the researched (Conquergood, 1991).
Perception of Self by Others

Depending on the interviewee, I was seen as a friend, as someone on the “other” side of a neighborhood issue, or as a co-complainer (see Katz, 1988). The possibilities of how I was viewed were real, and I needed to be mindful of them (see also Gilbert, 1980). I had to be mindful due to the possibility that my friends, my participants, wanted me to look good as a researcher. During this process, I tried to make sense of others as they tried to make sense of me as a researcher (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). While showing how food creates close personal bonds, I acknowledged the potential for insider/outsider conflicts as an ethnographer/participant observer who is part of the dinner group. I entered my research community as not only a founder of the studied event—family dinner—but also as a friend, neighbor, confidant, and extended family member.

The paradox of the insider qualitative researcher’s perspective is to be tuned-in to the experiences of others and at the same time to be aware of the biases and preconceptions of what he/she is trying to understand (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123). My perspective is further affected by my emotionality—the sensitivity I have to the topic of my dissertation (see Tillmann-Healy, 2003). The emotionality I brought to my research made the duality of my role as researcher and as a member of my research community more difficult to negotiate. The difficulty was mostly from my desire to be protective of my friends.

Glaser (1992) expressed concerns for being personally connected to the research due to the effect that preconceptions of the data can have on limiting the research findings due to not being open to what is presented through the data. Charmaz (2001) added that it is important to have procedures in place “for researchers to check, refine,
and develop their ideas and intuitions about the data” (p. 245). Furthermore, I was aware of how my role as a host of the events also brought a new and different perception to those that participated in the research study in that the participants had a relationship with me as well as I with them.

I begin the awareness of relationships with my participants through the food that we share at the family dinner events. Participants in the dinners can be compared to organizational members. Each member is accountable to the other in regards to their responsibilities to keep up the ritual of family dinner. The collaborative nature of sharing a meal with others is vital to the success of the event as well as to members of the community that invest in the welfare of others. Friendship is as much a part of the sustenance provided as the food that is shared. Food is used as a way to display the caring nature of the participants served every week.
Third Course

Communicative Food

Greene & Cramer (2011) stated that there is nowhere that lives can “be viewed more closely than in rituals involving food” (p. x) and Driver (2008) stated, “foods are literally everywhere...and food practices constitute a significant part of activities in organizations” (p. 928). Thus, the sharing of a meal gives neighbors a way to use food to not only communicate with each other, but also to learn about each other and nourish the exchange of social capital and feed their communal interactions. Simply speaking, we use food to communicate with those with whom we have commonality (such as those who attend family dinner). Counihan (1999) continued this conversation stating, “food is a product and mirror of the organization...a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena” (p.6), which allows food to be a source of personal and group agency. This agency gives voice to ideas that are sparked through the conversations via the dinner table.

Soler (1997) expressed how “…food is a language through which a society expresses itself” (p. 55) and as such brings credence to the adage: you are what you eat. The choices that we make in the foods that we bring to family dinner also speak to the level of commitment that the attendees have to nourishing community. By examining the choice in the foods we eat and share with others, we can formulate an image of our own
perceptions and understandings of others and seek to understand one another through the identity markers of food (Brillat-Savarin, 2000; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

**Food Identification**

The identity markers of food—who we are as a group—connect the participants of family dinner when they sit down to dine together (Visser, 1991). The food that is brought to each event is a signifier of the level of comfort toward the attendees and their relationship toward one another, which makes food a rich and complex tool for understanding others (Brillat-Savarin, 2000; Visser, 1991). This rich and complex tool makes the simple sharing of a meal a process through which food is seen as a form of discourse in a formalized ritual.

The formalized ritual of family dinner includes the formal and informal negotiation of identity and expression—the mark of social relationships built through the consumption of shared meals. Thus, food becomes the way in which the attendees of the weekly dinners establish and build relationships (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993) and learn about one another. The success of family dinner is made possible via the close personal bonds among the participants (Taylor, 1996; Veysey & Messner, 1999).

During the interview process, several interviewees addressed what a specific food item said about the person who brought it. Although this perspective was not yet asked in the interview, it came out organically in the process of interviewing. Jack was the first to have a discussion about the indicators that were perceived based upon the food item brought. Jack’s interview took place at his house as we shared a glass of wine. The atmosphere for his interview was relaxed and comfortable.
Jack

You can tell something about a person by what they bring to dinner. The person who frequently brings a pre-made dessert from the grocery store could be seen as someone who is busy and doesn’t have a lot of time to prepare something but still wants to participate. He/she also may not be able to cook, but usually non-cookers will at least bring a salad, which is simple, and it shows that they put some effort into preparing something to share. Purchasing something at the grocer, however, also shows a desire to participate despite busy schedules.

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In addition to Jack’s statement, Franklin’s discussion about the food brought came about during a long interview I had with him during a two-hour car ride as we were traveling together to visit a mutual friend. He told of his passion for food and how much he enjoyed trying different dishes that were brought to family dinner as he explained his perception of the representational value of food.

Franklin

For me, the food brought to family dinner was representational of who brought it. I knew who the better cooks were, so if a certain person brought something they had made, I knew from experience to avoid it. I applaud the effort of anyone who took the time to make something. I always tried to make something, but sometimes there just weren’t enough hours in the day. The one thing I can say is that for those who brought food consistently, the food was either consistently good or consistently bad. I still admired the person who made dishes that I did not like. It isn’t that I am judging the person; I just don’t like their cooking.
As far as store purchases go, I really try not to judge. You never know what kind of day that person had. They showed up with food that they are willing to share with others. I always gave the benefit of the doubt to those who stopped by their local grocer.

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While interviewing Bradley in the comfort of his living room, he discussed how food brings people together, but then he went into more detail about what the food that people brought said about that person’s attitude toward family dinner, and how some people have spoiled the “original purpose” of even having family dinner.

**Bradley**

Food is an item that brings people together. I think that it is important to share a meal with people. With regards to food that is brought to family dinner, I think the food says a lot about people. I think it shows creativeness with the way people present their contributions. It’s kind of their way of giving back to the community. Food shows a lot about health consciousness. Many people try to share a healthier aspect of their lives with others. I think the quantity of food that people bring says a lot about them from the aspect that they want to make sure everybody can try it; everybody is able to taste it. I know that when I bring food, I want to make sure that everybody has enough, which means making, for example, a meat dish and a vegetarian dish.

With regards to store-bought items, I think it mostly means that people are rushed, don’t have time to fix something homemade, but still prefer to attend family dinner rather than stay at home eating leftovers or a microwave dinner. This is not always the case, however. There are those who bring a small box of cookies, and then they pile up their plates, never touching their cookies, and then take the cookies back home if they remain
unopened—just to bring the same box back the next week. I consider these people freeloaders just there to eat a free meal.

There are people who just don’t care—bringing something just to bring something so they can come for the real reason, which is not, in my opinion, for the fellowship that is found at family dinner. They are really there for the free meal, which has nothing to do with the original intention of family dinner. I think it is those individuals who really don’t care to put forth the effort, who really put a blemish on the whole dinner night in general. Sometimes store bought is all you can manage, but for those who consistently do so week after week, it hurts the feelings of the host, I think. Overall, the majority who attend the weekly dinners try really hard, so it’s sad that there are a small number of people who have given me a bad taste in my mouth at times; I am not sure if others have experienced this or not. I’m not referring to the food they brought. Rather, I am referring to how their presence sucks the life out of what, for me, family dinner is supposed to represent.

Food Sharing

The value of food has been studied within the perspectives of its consumption and of its integral role in building close personal/familial bonds and community cohesion through social interaction. Specifically, food is a universal medium of communication. Furthermore, the kinds of foods shared and the manner in which they are prepared can build a sense of unity, as in the family dinner event. Thus, several studies looked at the value of food sharing as a social interaction.

In many cultures, food sharing or eating together reflects equal consideration, recognition, affinity, and acceptance. Eating together is still somewhat restricted. Unless
individuals deliberately discontinue patterns, they normally share food with individuals who are like them in some ways. When hosts and guests are from dissimilar backgrounds, the congeniality of food sharing can build relationships, which traverse major social limitations. The act of food sharing is essential to all communities of hospitality and kindness, and essential to preserving the existence of the community and to welcoming visitors. For numerous partakers, it is the highlight of their day and a revisiting of an earlier moment when families habitually shared meals (Jones, 2007). As described by Vanier (1995), “Sitting down at the same table meant becoming friends with them, creating a family…it was a way of life absolutely opposed to the values of a competitive, hierarchical society in which the weak are pushed aside” (p. 29).

While foods can be viewed as having social and economic factors that make a distinction between classes, eating is an act all human beings carry out, making eating a more classless, egalitarian product that has the possibility to transcend class structures. In fact, the Catholic Church refers to food as the “great leveler” (Pohl, 1999, p. 74). When individuals are quite different from one’s own background and views, we usually find it easier to prepare food for them than to take part in a conversation. Many people find it difficult to relate with diversely different individuals. As argued by Pohl (1999), sharing meals is “the most enriching part but the hardest part is...[to] just be with people” (p. 74).

Furthermore, food sharing is an important component of friendship and familial bonds in all forms of societies. The degree to which a person is asked to share a meal with another person is an indication of how close a family member, relative, or friend that individual is thought to be. As stated by Sahlin (1972), “Food dealings are a delicate barometer, a ritual statement as it were, of social relations, and food is thus employed
instrumentally as a starting, a sustaining, or a destroying mechanism of sociability” (215). In other words, food can gauge the sociable status of those who offer it and partake of it, affecting the interpersonal context of social interactions.

Although mere acquaintances may be asked for a cup of coffee, possibly together with snacks like junk foods, more intimate or closer family members or friends share complete meals, which is the intimate closeness that food brings to family dinner. The kind of food that is exchanged or shared and the regularity with which this takes place are key elements of personal relationships, and is thus associated with the creation of emotional ties.

Food is a powerful gift. Anthropologists, for example, have well known, with regards to the theory of Mauss (1967), that food sharing builds strong bonds among social groups and individuals, not only reciprocity and interdependency but the exchange of resources personally connected to one’s self. Food embodies an important human component that individuals communicate when they share food (Jones, 2007). General patterns of personal bonds are represented and carried out in different ways through sharing of food.

Observations

Before I observe the dinner events, I remind myself to be mindful of what the dishes brought to family dinner say about those who bring them. The one adjective that I believe describes nearly every attendee is—considerate. In the earlier days of the dinners, we would have themes, and people would pre-plan and divulge what they were going to bring the next week. As the attendance grew, themes became rather difficult to maintain. Now, family dinner is truly a potluck.
The menu is sometimes heavy on dessert, sometimes heavy on appetizers, and sometimes heavy on entrees, but there is never a shortage of community at family dinner. When these shortages occur, there is usually overcompensation at the next dinner, which perpetuates the problem. As this pattern becomes more apparent, there is a shift. Now, we tend to ignore the weeks when we are heavy on one aspect of the meal, and try to bring something that appeals to as wide a palate as possible, which results in a more balanced selection—most of the time.

As I observe tonight, I see that for the majority of attendees that there is an asserted effort to make sure there is a variety offered. It is this consideration given to the choices for the dishes brought that makes me glad to know that so many in attendance make such an effort. Even those who are too busy and have to stop by the store don’t just rush in and buy the first item they see (although, I think that does occur from time to time). There is certainly mindfulness in the process of choosing which food to bring. I think the best and most overreaching association that can be made from the food brought tonight is an expression of consideration for everyone who attends. Food communicates our friendships.

**Communicating Culture**

According to Goody (1982), all social relationships are sustained through food: ideas of moral individuality, practices of cooperation and friendship, femininity and masculinity, and gender and age affiliations are among the many examples of social relations created through food. For example, the Samburu of north-central Kenya are among the people for whom food fulfills an excessively major function in influencing social forces. The Samburu believe that food represents complex networks of symbols.
and causation outside the observable physical importance of everyday nourishment (Holtzman, 2009).

The view of Janet Carsten (1997) about relationships in her investigation of a Malay fishing community is relevant to the discussion of food sharing. Carsten claims that relationships, especially kinship, are not a fixed, predetermined status, but are dynamically created and facilitated through food sharing and other components of household activity. Basically speaking, relationships are constantly formed from different capabilities that are realized through active participation, which includes, among other things, food.

Basically, therefore, food is at the heart of social relationships; just like the saying of the Samburu community, “Friendship is through the stomach” (Holtzman, 2009, p. 132). Personal, familial, and social bonds are formed through the sharing of food. The capacity of food to build relationships is viewed not only in terms of kindness shown and expressed through material reciprocity but also as creating a bonding relationship via the exchange of social capital. In accepting the food from another person, an individual has engaged in and gained from the sweat of the giver—called *latakuny* by the Samburu—building strong bonds that are reinforced through recurrence (Holtzman, 2009, p. 73). Thus food should be included in discourses on the subject due to its relationship to community practices—the community-food effect.

The key points to be taken from scholars involving the study of food sharing are that the patterns they illustrate are still observed today; people learn to use dinner as a way of being hospitable and kind to others, which differs based on whether a person is a visitor or a host; people have progressed from the context where food is no longer a subject matter of consumption for survival, to a situation where food is constantly a
subject matter of discussion as people try to choose that which exhibits wisdom, propriety, and taste (Goody, 1982). Findings about the sustained value of kinship relationships indicate that food sharing remains very much a part of our world today.

For many of the participants of family dinner taste is displayed through the food they bring to the weekly dinner event. In bringing food to the weekly dinners, some take care to try to be aware of the importance of the dish they bring, as assumptions are made about people based upon their contribution to the meal.

During the course of the interviews, several of those interviewed spoke to the importance of food and how food represents so much more than sustenance. For instance, Robin, in her personal interview that took place after one of the Wednesday night dinners that I hosted, discussed how she felt that the sharing of food created a sense of belonging. As she made this claim, she explained how the weekly dinners gave her a strong sense of connection to not only the participants, but also to the overall community.

**Robin**

Food has always carried a positive connotation in my life due to the family gathering around the dinner table and sharing a meal and conversation. Your family is your first community—the people you trust and with whom you share your life. When you extend these feelings outside your immediate circle, your community grows. Sharing food creates common bonds and feelings, which promotes a sense of belonging. In times of need, when people share food (arguably one of the most important pillars to survival), it shows compassion; when people band together to find food (hunting or gathering), it forms a close-knit group. That is why events like potlucks are synonymous with community gatherings like block parties. Food brings people together. When I lived in
Bratislava, Slovakia, I interacted with people from all over the world who, at first glance, seemed so completely different from me without anything in common with me. Something that we all had in common, however, was food! One of the ways we got to know each other was by sharing meals, and the sharing of lunches and dinners evolved into strong friendship bonds.

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Beth, during her interview, also elaborated on the connections created through food sharing and how food invites conversations to take place between strangers who may not have anything more in common than their love of food, making food a communicator capable of bridging social relationships. Beth’s personal interview took place on her front porch as we watched other neighbors walk along the street from time to time.

Beth

Food always helps to bridge the gaps between individuals, groups, and communities. Eating with others can serve somewhat as an "ice breaker." Food serves as a "common ground." We all need to eat regardless of our personal histories, values, beliefs, political affiliations, religion, etc. It can also allow one to share personal family traditions with others.

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Lisa also adds to the bonding capability of food and she makes connections to how the conversations that Beth mentions above can begin to nourish relationships that began during the course of shared meals, such as those that take place during family
Lisa and I shared our stories of the communal value of food; we had more of a shared conversation than an actual interview.

**Lisa**

Food is an easy way to bring people together. A shared dinner offers a way to begin relationships of various types. To start, people can do something as simple as sharing recipes. In sharing the recipe, information is given not only about the food, but also about themselves. It can be as easy as talking about where we got the recipe and ten minutes later, we're sharing where we're from, what we do for a living, and how we may know a few of the same people or at least like the same foods. I love food and I love trying different foods—it makes me happy. Most people enjoy eating, and viewing food consumption positively is a great way to find common interests. So, as we are socializing and eating, doing something we enjoy, I think it can place us in a happier, friendlier, and more accepting frame of mind in which to open ourselves to others, both new friends and old ones alike.

**Cultural Dishes**

Such issues of culture and cultural dishes pass on messages to members of the community when attending community gatherings about the attendees of events such as family dinner. Foods of historical importance, cooked and served continually, connect existing members of the community to the heritage of those who share their cultural dishes. These dishes visually embody the community’s recollection of collective history. According to Mepham (1996), translated in a material form, this collective recollection is observed, shared, contemplated on, and consumed. Other dishes, usually those involving
difficult preparations, mirror the capabilities and knowhow of members of the community.

Some dishes are associated with religious holidays even though they may be adopted by other cultures. Latkes are one such dish that has made its way to the weekly dinners (see figure 3.1). Shredded potatoes and grated onions are bound with flour and eggs, and then fried in oil, to make delicious potato latkes that are crispy on the outside and soft on the inside. Latkes are a Jewish tradition eaten during the Hanukkah festival. The oil for cooking the latkes is symbolic of the oil from the Hanukkah story that kept the Second Temple of ancient Israel lit with a long-lasting flame that is celebrated as a miracle (Bowling, 2011). The word leviva, the Hebrew name for latke, has its origins in the Book of Samuel.

Latkes are made for family dinner during Hanukkah. For this particular family dinner it is requested that there be no pork and no shellfish brought to the host’s house that night due to the religious observance. This is a polite request, which all attendees observe in honor of those who observe Hanukkah in the neighborhood. Not only do the attendees of the dinners respect these wishes, but they also learn about another culture through their participation in this particular family dinner occasion. The respect for one another that begins through the sharing of food is made apparent by the adherence to the request for no pork or shellfish and also by the ability to make the request in the first place.
FIGURE 3.1—Latkes

Shredded potatoes and grated onions are bound with flour, salt and eggs, and then fried in oil.

**Ingredients:**

- 2 cups peeled and shredded potatoes
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon grated onion
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt
- 2-3 eggs, beaten
- ½ cup peanut oil for frying

**Directions:**
Place the potatoes in a cheesecloth and wring, extracting as much moisture as possible. In a medium bowl stir the potatoes, onion, eggs, flour and salt together. In a large heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil until hot. Place a large spoonful of the potato mixture into the hot oil, pressing down on them to form ¼ to ½ inch thick patties. Brown on one side, turn and brown on the other side. Let the latkes drain on paper towels. Serve hot!

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Traditional foods like pot roast are generally associated with southern “comfort food,” which is a perfect term for the relaxed environment created by family dinner. Many of the dishes brought as sides can also be classified as “comfort foods” such as mashed potatoes, string-bean casserole, etc.

The term "pot roast" can be used to describe either the cut of beef or the cooking method. For family dinner, the pot roast is usually cooked in a crock-pot with a mixture of vegetables. After cooking, the liquid is often thickened or cooked down to make gravy or sauce, and the meat is served with whatever else is brought to dinner.

Pot roast is typically a dinner served at Steve’s and my home (see figure 3.2). Each host house becomes known for the foods that are usually found at the home. There have actually been times that we did not make pot roast and attendees walked into the kitchen and immediately noticed that there were no crockpots out.

“We aren’t having pot roast tonight?”

“Sorry, we didn’t have time,” is the only reply I can give.

There is no need to go into how busy your day is. It is understood and everyone in attendance is always appreciative for those who are willing on a regular basis to open their homes for the weekly event of family dinner. Often the sentiment is mentioned that
if it were not for the generosity of the time and continued support of family dinner by the event’s hosts, there would not even be an event that welcomes new neighbors and old friends. An intangible energy fills the house when friends are gathered and laughing together as they share stories around the dinner table.

![FIGURE 3.2—Pot Roast](image)

Moist and juicy pot roast done in a slow cooker with carrots, onion and potatoes makes for a great meal; it is also easy to put together when preparation time is limited.

*Ingredients:*

- 4-6 pounds of chuck roast
- salt and pepper to taste
- ½ a bottle of beer (or 1 cup of water)
- ½ a bag of carrots
- horseradish
- 1 clove of garlic (or more to taste)
- 1 onion finely chopped
- 3-4 potatoes chopped
- 1 cup of chopped jalapenos
- cayenne pepper to taste
Directions:

Season the roast with salt and pepper (or just pepper or add the cayenne pepper if you like a little more zest) place in the crockpot (slow cooker) and set on low. Add beer (water), onion, potatoes, carrots, mushrooms and jalapenos. Cover and cook for 8-10 hours.

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As I have stated previously, each host house is known for the types of food that are likely to be served. Attendees of family dinner know that there will usually be an exotic flare to the meal when Mike and Vernon are hosting. It is nice to have the variety of food preferences and tastes so that the weekly dinners do not become dulled by food prepared and served on a repetitive basis. Keeping things interesting for attendees is easily accomplished at Mike and Vernon’s house, which is where I had Kimchi for the first time (see figure 3.3). Dating to the Shilla Dynasty (approximately 2,000 years ago), Kimchi is Korea’s national dish.

FIGURE 3.3—Kimchi
This is a great authentic Korean dish; it has a great flavor and just enough spice without being too powerful.

*Ingredients:*

1 head Napa cabbage  
3 green onions minced  

⅛ cup salt  
cayenne pepper to taste  

6 cloves of garlic  
1 small apple (chopped)  

1 piece of ginger root (peeled and chopped)  
1 small radish (chopped)  

1 small white onion (peeled and chopped)  
2 tablespoons of water

*Directions:*

Tear off the cabbage and rinse well. Put the cabbage in a bowl and salt liberally, tossing the cabbage to mix the salt. Set the salted cabbage aside for 1 hour. Mix more salt and set aside for another hour. Wash and drain the cabbage. Combine the garlic, ginger, and white onion in a blender with the water. Blend on high until smooth. Add blended mixture to the rinsed and drained cabbage along with the minced onions, cayenne pepper, apple, and radish mixing well. Place the completed mixture into an airtight container and refrigerate for three days before serving.

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A traditional dessert that has made its way to family dinner is Black Forest cake (see figure 3.4). The cake is named not directly after the Black Forest (*Schwarzwald*) mountain range in southwestern Germany but rather from the specialty liquor of that region, known as *Schwarzwälder Kirsch(wasser)* and distilled from tart cherries. This is the ingredient, with its distinctive cherry pit flavor and alcoholic content, which gives the cake its flavor. Cherries, cream, and Kirschwasser were first combined in the form of a dessert in which cooked cherries were served with cream and Kirschwasser.
This traditional German dessert has been brought to family dinner by two attendees who purchased a restaurant/deli in Tampa after moving to the area from Germany. Since they are restaurant owners, there is an expectation by other attendees for them to bring something not only homemade, but indicative of their cultural heritage as well. Not every dish is as elaborate as the Black Forest cake, but a notable trait about their desserts is the reduced amount of sugar. It’s not that they are not sweet, they just are not overly sweet.

The general conversation around the desserts goes something like this.

“Your desserts are so good, and they are not too sweet”

“Americs and their desserts; you always put in too much sugar. Why do you want desserts to be so sweet?”

“I guess we are addicted to sugar in the same way that we get addicted to so many of our foods, or at least what we put into the foods.”

FIGURE 3.4—Black Forest Cake
### Ingredients:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>2 ¼ cups all-purpose flour</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 cup white sugar</td>
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<td>¼ cup unsweetened cocoa powder</td>
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<td>1 ½ teaspoons baking soda</td>
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<td>¼ teaspoon salt</td>
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<td>3 eggs</td>
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<td>1 cup milk</td>
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<td>½ cup vegetable oil</td>
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<td>1 tablespoon vanilla extract</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 cans pitted sour cherries</td>
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<tr>
<td>¼ cup cornstarch</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 teaspoon vanilla extract</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 cups heavy whipping cream</td>
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<tr>
<td>¼ cup confectioners’ sugar</td>
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### Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C). Grease and flour two (9 inch, round) cake pans; cover bottoms with waxed paper. In a large bowl, combine flour, 2 cups sugar, cocoa, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Add eggs, milk, oil, and 1 tablespoon of vanilla; beat until well blended. Pour batter into prepared pans. Bake for 35 minutes, or until wooden toothpick inserted in centers comes out clean. Cool layers in pans on wire racks 10 minutes. Loosen edges, and remove to racks to cool completely. Drain cherries, reserving ½ cup juice. Combine reserved juice, cherries, 1 cup of sugar and cornstarch in a 2-quart saucepan. Cook over low heat until thickened, stirring constantly. Stir in 1 teaspoon of vanilla. Cool before using. Combine whipping cream and confectioner's sugar in a chilled medium bowl. Beat with an electric mixer at high speed until stiff peaks form. With long serrated knife, split each cake layer horizontally in half. Tear one split layer into crumbs; set aside. Reserve 1 1/2 cups of frosting for decorating the cake. Gently brush loose crumbs off top and side of each cake layer with a pastry brush or hands. To assemble, place one cake layer on cake plate. Spread with 1 cup frosting; top with 3/4 cup cherry topping. Top with second cake layer; repeat layers of frosting and
cherry topping. Top with third cake layer. Frost the sides of the cake. Pat reserved crumbs onto frosting on side of cake. Spoon reserved frosting into pastry bag fitted with star decorator tip. Pipe around the top and bottom edges of the cake. Spoon the remaining cherry topping onto the top of the cake.

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Similar to all other symbols, the value of food is characterized by the people and communities that make use of, consume, and relate with the food being presented (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). For instance, apple pie is considered to be the emblem of America representing an image of American life during an earlier, simpler time in our history. When apple pie is considered in other circumstances and taken out of the American culture and put into another setting, this message is forgotten. The cultural difference makes the way the dearly beloved American symbol is characterized and experienced completely different than the way apple pie is considered in American culture (Christensen & Levinson, 2003).

As representations, foods can symbolize both negative and positive images. The crawfish, a greatly cherished shellfish of Louisiana, is a food and a symbol embodying attributes cherished by people of Louisiana: chaotic history, pride, and determined will. Yet, Maine’s lobster is a culinary symbol with a distinct essence. For the inhabitants of Maine who traditionally regarded the lobster a trash food, the growing popularity of lobster in restaurants is an indication of how the arrival of summer inhabitants and vacationers has transformed their state and its association to lobster (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). The capacity of food to symbolize and remind members of the community of their origins and identity is evident in the outcome of food’s capacity to function as a consumable and visual representation for the attendees of family dinner.
Group Identity

As a consumable, shareable, and concrete cultural material, food is essential to the building and preservation of communities and group identities. The presentation, preparation, and ingredients of meals reflect a concrete representation of a community and a chance for members to share and take part in that identity via food sharing. Similar to other cultural objects and practices like holidays or clothing, food allows communities to express and celebrate their cultural and religious individuality. But because food is consumed, it has a power and a value surpassing other cultural objects (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). Every time a dish is prepared and consumed in a community, the meals offered, as well as the history, beliefs, and traditions they embody, are implanted into the bodies and thoughts of all members of the community.

In several of the more encouraging depictions of community, particular institutions, such as family dinner, are viewed as foundations. From the point of view of food, such institutions comprised of clubs, bars, and cafes; as well as specific types of food celebrations, like street parties, community center events and other related communal outdoor occasions, many other religious festivals (e.g., Thanksgiving, Ramadan); and weekly neighborhood dinners. In all these contexts, food sustains its sociable and communicative function. In numerous communities, ceremonial and festive foods strengthen ties of cultural groups (Flammang, 2009). By sharing these foods with the attendees of family dinner, cultural norms are also shared.

Food is an institutionalized, but not essentially prescribed, means for individuals to bond with their tradition, a delicate type of reinforcing of civil society (Counihan, 2007). According to Flammang (2009), the unavoidable displacements of social and economic mobility forced a large number of Americans to root themselves in common
foods, whereas simultaneously accepting the foreign foods related to their new places of residence after a move.

Ties formed through the sharing of food among friends and family members or relatives are apparent. However, what is it about dishes and foods that allow us to relate to unfamiliar communities: national, regional, local, religious, and racial? Community ties, similar to those of friends and family members, are bonding agents in civil society, which then allow for more participation and interaction within different types of community.

Through food, we can discuss and come together on a wide range of topics, such as our colorful history of labeling people. Flammang (2009) discussed an observed conversation details the difficulty of having to discover a way of understanding double identities—in this case, American and Ethiopian. The person initiating the conversation said he and several of his Ethiopian colleagues talked with several American-born associates, and the conversation became intense. Flammang (2009) then discussed this very situation, but the conversation took place “over a meal of savory meats and Ethiopian bread,” in an effort “to start a dialogue about their similarities, their differences and issues of identity at time of demographic change” (p. 215). This is a vivid illustration of the daily function of food in the continuous dynamics of building identity and a sense of community.

In my interview with Franklin, while on that long car ride, he elaborates on the function of food as a common identifier that does not take into account our vast differences.
Franklin

We all need to eat regardless of our personal histories, values, beliefs, political affiliations, religion, etc. It can also allow one to share personal family traditions with others creating a way to introduce your culture to others.

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Jack contributes to the conversation as well when he shares his belief that food identifies commonalities with others.

Jack

It's one of the basic elements that humans have in common—the need to eat; across the globe and in every corner of the universe, food has been an expression of one's culture. In community, food helps people to relax with one another, giving us something in common to focus upon.

At family dinner, our food represents who we are as individuals or households, and we often come to know, and appreciate, each other in relation to the dish that each person brought. For example, I loved that Steve would exclaim, ‘Oh good! You're bringing that cornbread again! Perfect!’ And that Mike & Vernon would prepare elaborate meat & vegetarian dishes with an ethnic theme for each dinner. If we have nothing else in common, we can at least talk about the food!

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All of these instances reveal how food symbolizes the close bonds that are nourished through participation at the family dinner event and how that nourishment feeds into the growth of community through clearer understandings of one another.
Reflections on the Literature

The literature gives support that food can and does act as a means of communication. Through the food that is brought to events such as family dinner, others can learn about who we are by revealing cultural traditions and customs. The observations and personal stories given by the attendees of family dinner support the literature’s claims of food as a communicator. Food represents so much more than just the nutritional value it provides. Food is a rich and symbolic communication of the interactions among and within communities/organizations. There is also support for the secondary claim of using food as an identifier that can be managed and negotiated. My research is in line with these claims, but where the literature is sparse is on how food is able to sustain strong bonds, which can help to feed community participation. In the next chapter, I address the question: How does food communicate, create, and sustain bonds of friendship?
Course 4

Bonds Through Food

The creation of close personal bonds creates a stronger sense of community through social interaction. Social interaction is a basic requirement for the development of self-identity and for participating in social acts with other participants within a community (Mead, 1934). Interaction with members of any community is a vital part of defining one’s self. The relationships found within the context of family dinner become the primary unit through which the sharing of food and community involvement evolves into significance of the self and others through a direct observation and participation in the dinners themselves (Barthes, 2008). Levi-Strauss (1983) took this a step further when he discussed how food is a code that informs us about social relationships such as those found within the bonds of family dinner.

The bonds of community are affected through the greater influence of the socio-cultural connections and social interactions (Dimitriadis, 2001; Gravenkemper, 2007) including invitations to events exclusive of the dinners, continued attendance at family dinner, and group commitment to the continuation of rituals old and new, all of which help to form a close bond of friendship and encourage engaged participation in the larger community. Food as a communicator speaks to the overall community commitment that results from relational bonds formed over shared meals that foster friendships and create a negotiated culture among group members (Greene & Cramer, 2011). The cultural
intersections of food and close personal bonds foster and support larger community networks such as the Book Club, Garden Club, Bicycle Club, and civic engagement. Proctor (2004) encouraged the call from Denton (1982) urging “scholars to examine interacting individuals” and to “engage in direct examination of human life” (p. 55).

Negotiated cultures involve shared traits such as personality characteristics, lifestyles, and location, which work together to form a relaxed state free from judgments and to build close emotional bonds (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). The emotional bonds depend on the interaction with others. At the highest level of intimacy, the social network created becomes an integrated network of care that provides help to individuals (House & Kahn, 1985). The network of care forms the socialization process through which social interactions and relational bonds are not only created, but are also maintained (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Eating alone can be an uncomfortable activity; whereas, sharing a meal and the accompanying socialization are a comfortable coupling. Individuals usually prefer to eat in company; likewise, when receiving visitors, getting together with friends, or entertaining acquaintances, people usually express generosity, hospitality, and friendship through food. It is hard to picture a social gathering where there is no food. Food in a social gathering builds an ambiance of familiarity and attachment. It creates a close personal/familial bond between the host and the guest and makes interaction among guests possible.

Irrespective of the social event, foods also play a symbolic role. Take, for instance, the food given to mourning individuals following the death of a loved one. These foods do not only feed the body, but they also fulfill an emotional, psychological, and symbolic function. The sharing or bringing of food gives solace to the bereaved,
provides the giver the chance to show sympathy, and encourages life despite the loss, inspiring the bereaved to continue living. Whether individuals eat at a dining area or at a social occasion, they get great pleasure from their meals in the company of others, and companionship is strengthened through food (Mepham, 1996). The term “commensality,” as mentioned by Counihan (2007), refers to the act of sharing food and eating in the company of others, an endeavor that not simply nourishes the body, but also builds and fortifies friendships.

Scholars have looked at friendship in more vague and ambiguous terms such as geographical (Gravenkemper, 2007; Epstein, 2006), political (Bowler, 1991), and theoretical (Bickford, 1996) uses, but this study looks at the bonding use of friendship as noted by Spencer & Pahl (2006), Rawlins (2009), and Tillmann-Healy (2001).

Spencer and Pahl (2006) added to the discussion of bonding connections by stating that friendship bonds create an environment wherein there is freedom from judgment, as well as, a strengthening of close emotional connections that establish a network of relational support and extend friendship into the realm of a “family of choice” (p. 133). Additionally, Rawlins (1992) spoke of the bonds of friendship as an interpersonal relationship, which is characterized by ongoing negotiations. I have personally found friendship to be just as demanding of time, commitment, and respect as any other relationship. Unfortunately, there is still a presumption of friendship as something less than other relationships. Holleran (1996) commented on this less than view of friendship when he referred to the use of friend to describe a relationship. Friend sounds “…like an euphemism; a word that could not convey what our bond really was” (pp. 34-35). I want to amend this outdated marginal position of friendship that seems to be resurfacing due to on-line friendships (see Carter, 2005). Friendships are not like the
superficial, shallow exchanges of greetings of acquaintances as they pass one another. Through the sharing of a meal, close bonds of friendship can and have been created worldwide.

While we are not born into the friendships that we maintain, close friendships are no less committed relationships than those into which we are born; close friendships can develop into familial bonds that go beyond the unstable and uncertain nature of acquaintance types of friendships. According to Rawlins (1992) “friendship implies affective ties” (p. 12) meaning that there is a strong emotional element that keeps a person in our thoughts. Such a level of consciousness speaks to the connection that can be created through food.

Food is simply and widely shared. The one who gives has practically nothing to lose by sharing or offering this fleeting and economical resource. The sharing of food with a guest or friend is a common and straightforward way to show generosity, congeniality, hospitality, and thoughtfulness with reasonable expense to the giver. When receiving or entertaining visitors, the host is usually supposed to provide foods; if provided, it is regarded impolite on the part of the visitor to refuse the offer. This food exchange between acquaintances or individuals builds familial and/or close personal bonds, or, more particularly, a bond of nurturing and sharing, as the host caters to the needs of other people (Counihan, 2007). Since nurturing is the task of family members or relatives, food sharing simply builds and bolsters a closer relationship between the host(s) and guest(s).

Food sharing builds a bond of nurturing because food is essential for survival. The capacity of food to nurture is additionally expanded by its capacity, in several instances, to provide psychological sustenance. The capacity of food to change
psychological attitude is known by people who resort to “comfort foods” at moments of depression or loneliness (Mepham, 1996). The sharing of food and nurture in this manner generates a cyclical exchange of resources. In the act of gift giving, there is an expectation that the recipient will give back in the near future. For instance, if an acquaintance offers food or hosts a social gathering, there is an implicit expectation that the generosity will be reciprocated. Such expectations build a cycle of food exchange that engenders gifts, social interactions, and strong bonds among family and friends.

A great deal of research on the social essence of exchanges of resources originates from cultural anthropology. The Kung of South Africa, which is a hunter-and-gatherer community, has rigid social restrictions on the act of food sharing. After hunting, the meat is distributed among the hunters. The distribution process is rooted in social relationships (Miller, Rozin, & Fiske, 1998). Similarly, the West African Moose of Burkina Faso has rigid social rules on sharing of resources. Within the Moose community, consubstantiation—the doctrine that Jesus Christ’s body and blood coincide with the Eucharist’s bread and wine—through eating is a personal act that builds familial bonds (Miller et al., 1998).

According to Ray and Srinivas (2012), the sharing of food in the culture of Hindu Indians embodied major social meanings, both in the family and the entire community. In India, welcoming food offered by another individual is viewed as an equalizing act, and a kind of personal unity; to turn down food from an individual belonging to a lower caste functions to preserve caste inequality. People from higher castes could offer food to members of a lower caste without the risk of losing their status, but they could not accept food from members of a lower caste. “Clearly food choices and eating patterns are influenced by broader social class inequalities” (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 96).
Within family dinner, however, we endeavor to cultivate a supportive and egalitarian space in which to encourage one another in order to foster close personal bonds.

Obligatory social restrictions surrounding food sharing or exchange could have emerged over thousands of years in Western Europe. Anthropologists discover widespread food sharing with guests in Medieval Europe. For instance, Elias (1978) discovered that as an indication of being civilized, members of the aristocracy discontinued sharing meals from a common serving dish and began making use of flatware; members of the lower class soon emulated this and other associated practices of food sharing.

Douglas (1966) argued that food-sharing practices reflect the social and personal bonds in a community. The tradition of food sharing reflects “hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (Counihan, 2007, 36). The social implication of food sharing, as evidently shown by the culture of Hindu Indians, is greatly associated with building personal and familial bonds, and with the establishment of hierarchies. Thus it touches the basic status and relationship dimension, and becomes a primary or secondary way of creating and resolving these usually incompatible relationships.

The claims of Heider (1958) and Goffman (1971) suggested that food sharing is a social representation of close bonds, which can be exercised or interpreted like all other social symbols. According to Patterson (1991), “…in general, the greater the intimacy of the relationship between the partners, the higher the level of mutual involvement will be” (p. 470) or the more personal the nature of the bonds formed through family dinner become. When we share a meal, we are constantly invading another’s space (Hall, 1966), for example reaching across the table. Close personal bonds are expressed through ways
such as touch, spatial closeness, and frequent eye contact. The act of sharing a meal and building these close personal bonds is a ritual itself. Miller and colleagues (1998) argued that these same close personal bonds are also expressed through food sharing, and further suggest that the degree of closeness is directly related to the various forms of food sharing. Through the material discussed in this chapter, I demonstrate the complex ways in which food and familial bonds interact. The eating rituals involved with family dinner reflect familial processes while simultaneously establishing relationships and boundaries.

**Making Connections**

As Visser (1991) pointed out, food connects others when they sit down to dine together. In this case, food connects the participants of family dinner, revealing how food is a key component in the formation of close personal bonds. Ben shares his experience regarding the bonds formed through attending family dinner. “The people you associate with [at family dinner] fill in the roles that family members would perform, but are unable to because they don’t live in the same city. So, if you need someone to watch a pet while you’re out of town or provide a ride to the airport, these are the people you’d turn to. Walking into a weekly dinner and seeing familiar face has a similar feeling as walking in and seeing a family member.”

With the familial aspect of family dinner, many attendees do refer to each other as family. Family dinner provides a venue for the forging of close personal bonds similar to family (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Many scholars associate this family of choice with gay friendships (see Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Cohen, 1985; Weston, 1991), but I have observed that the familial ties have been established among other non-traditional notions of family. In chapter one, I mention that only 23% of the residents of Seminole Heights fit
into the traditional definition of family. I think that the success of family dinner is due to the desire to belong—to have that familial aspect in our daily lives. I think this is especially true for those that do not have that traditional sense of family.

Observations

Tonight was a perfect night to observe the weekly dinners. At times I try to focus on different aspects of my research as they apply to family dinner, but tonight was a natural progression of the familial connections that have been established through family dinner. Several people were discussing the upcoming marriage of one of our friends. These friends do not attend the weekly dinners, but are active in hosting other events on an annual basis, attended by many of those at family dinner. As the conversation turned to other familial aspects of the ties created through family dinner, there was a discussion about the births that have taken place within the village known as Seminole Heights.

There have been six births among the attendees of family dinner. The close friendships formed through these weekly dinners have allowed friends from the Seminole Heights community to either be present at the hospital during labor, or shortly after birth to be with our extended family members. In all of these cases, but for different reasons, there has been a significant reduction in, if not a complete halt to the attendance of these couples at the weekly dinners. For some, there was still attendance when the child was small. Eventually the responsibilities of the new family precluded these couples from attending the weekly dinners. These absent faces are still a part of the community formed through family dinner, but attendance at events is limited to child-friendly gatherings that typically occur earlier than family dinner.
I hear these accounts as people share their knowledge of what happened to the couples after giving birth to their child/children and how the dynamics changed, but even that shows a familial relationship. When family members begin having children, there is a natural reduction in the time they spend with friends. Their priorities change. Instead of going to the movies or dinner, there are ball games and recitals to attend. Instead of staying out until 1:00 a.m., there is homework that has to be reviewed before their child goes to bed. The friendships have not ended after starting a family; the dynamics have simply changed as they would within any family. Responsibilities shift after having children.

**Family**

Reading through the literature review, I am drawn to the connections that I make with this group that I refer to as my _family_. While I know that I have deep long-term connections to many of those with whom I have developed strong bonds of friendship, I am noticing that the strong bonds created are less and less frequent in occurrence as more and more people attend. My committee warned me to be mindful of the potential harm that could be inadvertently caused through this project, but I never considered the potential harm regarding my view of family dinner due to the realizations made while doing this research. The research did not cause this diminished value of family dinner; it just helped shed light on the fact that the popularity of family dinner was due to the bonds created through the event, and that the popularity diminished some of the value of family dinner due to the large attendance. I have to wonder, was I wrong to be concerned about the decreased participation from its height of 80+ attendees? It is the smaller attendance
that has allowed for the close personal bonds. That is the strength of these weekly dinners.

Before I became involved in this neighborhood, I had never had the type of connections to not only place, but also to those around me. Sharing aspects of my life with others had been an alien concept to me. I rarely share anything personal with my birth family aside from the general information about work and upcoming trips. While I have worked hard to develop close friendship bonds, I also feel that, at least in the beginning of the familial relationships, I have thrust myself into uncharted territory—never knowing at what level or how to share personal information. Over the years, the maps of these close bonds of friendship have been better charted, but I still find myself being mindful of personal boundaries.

I find myself being reflexive about the statement of personal boundaries. When creating such close bonds of friendship, do the limits set on disclosure keep people at a distance, making it easier to get through a break-up of a relationship and/or a friendship, but still maintain a friendship? Or, do limits make it unfeasible to maintain friendships because by not allowing a person to know more personal aspects of one’s self there is nothing upon which to build?

I have seen a few friendships between family dinner participants end over the years. Overall, however, the participants do tend to get along and have a great deal of respect for one another and for our differences. Some of my closest friends hold different political and religious beliefs; yet, I have learned they are more than their political or religious views. This understanding of our personal identity has been the catalyst for sharing a meal with neighbors, allowing me to make connections with those who attend family dinner but do not share my same beliefs and values. It is through the connections
of the close personal bonds of friendship that I have formed, within and surrounding Seminole Heights, that allow me to be the kind of friend that I could never have been when I was younger, even though I was still looking for connections to people and places then as well. In my past, I was more likely to walk away from those different from myself rather than see similarities. Others have also stated that they are more receptive to others and have come to know close friends as family due to sharing a meal.

Steve, while sitting with me in our living room, gave an account of the familial relationships shared by many of the attendees that were nourished by participation in family dinner conversations.

**Steve**

The good outweighs the bad. It’s who we are—family; we do things for each other. The closeness that is created by helping one another strengthens the bonds of familial ties. Like the time Mike told me that he and his partner, Vernon, were going to have to move because Mike lost his job.

Mike told me, ‘We were ready to go. We had it all lined up. The barrier to leaving, though, was the close relationships we had made at family dinner, and we decided not to move. We stayed because this is our family. I was able to get a job and then a better job through my connections within our extended family. These types of situations cannot be easily duplicated without the sense of family that has been formed.’

That sense of family is what has been created through the years of eating, laughing, and crying with one another around the dinner table. Yet, everything does not remain status quo; we have had disagreements along the way.
Conflicts and Dilemmas

Rawlins (1983) remarked on the difficulty of negotiating the tensions of close relationships. He stated, “…tensions are common in relationships. These tensions constitute subtle and covert dilemmas that must be managed if a relationship is to flourish” (p. 256). Friendships should not be written off as unmanageable just because of these tensions and dilemmas. Rather, they need to be managed and used as a springboard for discussion so those involved can see the legitimacy of the conflict and reach some type of resolution. According to Rawlins (1983), such discussions enhanced the close personal bonds of friendship.

About five years ago, there was a rift in the neighborhood. It was through discussions with one another that friendships were maintained and the community got through its first test of the strength of their friendship bonds relatively unscathed. There are still arguments and disagreements, however. These disagreements almost always turn into light-hearted banter in the form of sarcasm, which cause the friendship network to look at their differences with humor, and to celebrate their similarities. It may not be the hardest task to maintain this strong friendship network, but it is not a walk in the park either. The friendships forged through participation in family dinner respect one another despite any differences, accepting each other as a “good person.” It does not matter if a friend is Republican, Democrat, or Independent; straight or gay; single or married. Everyone is viewed as an individual, not as a category. This may not be true for every single participant of family dinner, but it is true for the core group of attendees that consider one another family. In that core group all of the categories listed are represented, we all see past those categories, and we accept each other despite our
differences. Despite our level of friendship, we are all still affected when strife enters our community.

The strife that took place in the recent past encompassed a battle for and against a local historic designation for the Hampton Terrace Neighborhood of Seminole Heights. The political strife that has caused this rift through the Seminole Heights neighborhood has only strengthened the core group of neighbors who have been instrumental in maintaining the tradition of Wednesday night dinners for thirteen years as of March 2013. This accomplishment of keeping the weekly dinners going during a time of community unrest is a source of great pride for the core members of family dinner. With such a great accomplishment and all the accolades received through write-ups in Southern Living, local newspapers, and individual blogs a great fear is present as well.

The friendship network that is as old as the dinners themselves has a valid fear for the future of the dinners, community engagement, and the ties of the extended family system. These core members are getting older, and while they hope to always be a part of each other’s lives, they realize that a job-related transfer, as one example, could cause them to leave the area. Each member of this extended family expects, like most families, to be able to depend upon one another for another dozen years or more, but the reality is that we do not focus on the future. We prefer to maintain the illusion that we will stay together forever, and take each tomorrow as it comes.

Given this level of closeness, the value that the friendship network bestowed upon each of us creates a family of choice within the Seminole Heights neighborhood. During the Wednesday night dinners, the core members of this friendship network welcome neighbors new and old to break bread and share stories. Occasionally, a neighbor will click with the core group, and be invited to events outside of the Wednesday night ritual.
The closer members of the friendship network take vacations and weekend trips together, go out to dinner in smaller groups, and take more of an active participation in the social activities of each extended family member.

Dilemmas often arise during different stages/intervals of friendships. When they arise, and how we handle them, are functions of our communicative skills in interpersonal relationships. How many times have we kept silent to avoid hurting another’s feelings? At what point in a relationship do these dilemmas surface? A dilemma must be revealed before an individual can know that a need for concealment exists. Rawlins (1983) told us that in order to achieve intimacy, “mutual expressiveness is necessary” (p. 4).

Through the sharing of food, mutual expressiveness has occurred at family dinner. Neighbors have found ways, for the most part, to look past differences and become friends. Over the course of thirteen years, these friendships endured. All is not paradise, however, when strong familial bonds are established among friends. Perhaps we all need some time away to revitalize our own selves before we can continue to offer ourselves as friends and/or as extended family members. This time away during disagreements is addressed with Lisa’s and Bradley’s account of the familial aspect of family dinner during the group interview; the group interview took place in the upstairs den during a Wednesday night dinner. We held the interview upstairs so that we would not be disturbed by the other attendees of family dinner.

Lisa

Seeing friends/neighbors on a regular basis builds a familiarity with each other. Familiar => familial => family! Same root. Family, to me, is not so much about a
perfection or continual happiness within a group of people, but commonness among its members that makes it possible to work through the rough times. In the case of our family dinner, it was the commonness of living in the same neighborhood, sharing food, and the ritual of weekly gatherings. Lots of people at the dinners have very little else in common—just like in families—but we generally all enjoy each other's company during the dinners. Also familial in nature was the fact that there often was one (or more) person(s) who didn't care to be convivial with one another, and just like at other family gatherings, they sat at opposite ends of the room. No hard feelings, just a natural progression away from each other.

* * * * *

Additionally, Bradley relates the conflicts that have arisen to the dysfunctional element that can be found in families.

Bradley

Many of the components of the weekly dinners have a familial aspect: consistency, familiarity, feels somewhat like a "holiday time" or tradition, or a time for sharing. There is also a "dysfunctional" element that also has a familial feel. In no way do I mean this to be negative. I simply mean that within families there is feuding, disagreements, resentment, etc.—all very normal; all very much components that exist within family dinner.

Friendship Networks

While the benefits of forming these connections can be personally beneficial, some attendees appreciate the connection that is created by family dinner as a way to
unwind. Kathy mentions this positive aspect of family dinner in her interview. “The familial aspects that draw me to Family Dinner are the comfort and the sense of belonging that comes with attending week after week. There's no need to be anything but you. One thing I love about our neighborhood, in general, is how non-judgmental and accepting people are (well, most of them anyway). It's just a great way to unwind in the middle of the week without the need to get dressed up or cook anything elaborate.

Ginger appreciates the non-judgmental aspect of family dinner. After she divorced⁶, she was apprehensive to bring her new boyfriend, Sam, to family dinner. During her personal interview, which took place at her house in the living room, Ginger shared her initial fear of how she and Sam would be treated by other attendees of family dinner.

**Ginger**

Everyone had known me as part of ‘Jacob and Ginger.’ While I knew people were accepting and understanding of the divorce, I always worried that people might judge Sam or make him out to be some kind of home wrecker. I also didn't want Sam to feel like he was the replacement.

The first time Sam and I came to family dinner together was at Bradley’s house and Jacob was there too. It actually made it easier that Jacob was there because we all chatted, and it wasn't awkward for us to see each other, which made it not awkward for others to see us as friends instead of a couple. It also showed people that Jacob and I

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⁶ As a point of interest, we have had four divorces/separations among the regularly attending members of the community gatherings. In two cases, both persons still attend the weekly dinners. In the other two cases, only one partner still attends family dinner, but the other person remains friends with group members and comes to other functions in order to leave family dinner for the ex-partner to enjoy.
were in a good place and there was no need to choose sides or endure any drama. Jacob and I have discussed our attendance at family dinner, and he has chosen to no longer attend, having moved out of the neighborhood. Jacob still maintains relationships that were made through participation in family dinner, and is regularly invited to other neighborhood events.

Now, a year after Sam moved here, family dinner is as much of a part of his weekly ritual as it is mine. I realize now my apprehensions over his acceptance were entirely unnecessary. He is completely comfortable; he goes off on his own and participates in conversations with someone who has more shared interests than would be possible by just hanging out with me. It helps that Sam is outgoing and able to talk with anyone, but there isn’t, and never was, any awkwardness. We come to family dinner relaxed and comfortable knowing that we are among close friends who leave most of their judgments at home. I think food makes the conversation easier, especially for people you don't know well.”

Divorce and break-ups have both had an effect on others’ attendance at family dinner and the close bonds that had been created. Robert, who was partnered with Bradley, discusses during his personal interview, why he has never been to family dinner since the split between them. My interview with Robert was more of a light conversation that took place in the International Mall.

**Robert**

When Bradley and I broke up, I knew that I was always welcomed to attend the dinners, but I did not want things to be awkward. I know that Bradley is OK with me attending, but I don’t think that I am ready. Even though Bradley and I are still friends,
the break-up is still too fresh for me, and I still fear judgments from others. I know that I shouldn’t and no one has given me any reason to think that I would be looked at differently. I just am not ready.

* * * *

While Robert maintains connections that he originally made through attendance at family dinner, he does not attend neighborhood functions. Instead, he invites others to join him at more neutral places (i.e. bars and restaurants) that we now have in Seminole Heights. By extending invitations to connect outside the family dinner, Robert is able to maintain bonds originally formed through the neighborhood event.

Jack and Bradley are one of the divorced/separated couples who both continue to attend family dinner. They claim that they are better friends than partners. In fact, their relationship grew closer over time through the interactions of family dinner and other community events. Their claims indicate that they are closer now than they had ever been when they lived together as a couple.

There was some concern after the break-up between Jack and Bradley since they both had strong connections to many of the members of the community not only through the weekly dinners, but also through their involvement in many other community events. No one wanted to be put in a position of feeling like they could not be friends with one for the fear of offending the other. Luckily that was a concern that never needed to be addressed since they both maintained a connection to family dinner and a strong connection to one another. Unfortunately, not all break-ups end so amicably, but is that not the case in most familial situations? There is still, according to these statements, a perceived stigma to divorce, or at least a fear of rejection due to the involvement of both
individuals with family dinner. However, due to the family-like friendships the social integration of the divorced or broken-up couples has not been an issue.

Rawlins (2009) took the concept of family-like friendship networks a step further than just a source of emotional support. For Rawlins (2009), a *friendship network*, as a group, had strong political implications. Using the examples of the feminist movement, small labor unions, and gay communities as *friendship networks*, Rawlins (2009) stated “the double agency of friendship serves both personal and social integration in political involvement” (p. 196), meaning that these networks can affect the status quo and change societal structures. With the ability to affect political and social change, the *friendship network* becomes a source of personal and group agency, which is a form of connection that can be applied to the close bonds and networks created within the Seminole Heights neighborhood.

Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) addressed this type of friendship and food research, specifically, as a method to “…convey a sense of modern realities” by “…follow[ing] the creation of identity within a group having voluntary membership (i.e., one that a person is not born into, but may choose whether to join) through the uses of food to mark the boundaries of that group” (p. 93). Thus, the focus on the attendees of family dinner creates an environment for observing the symbolic significance of food and the friendship bonds forged through food sharing.

For Giddens (1992), friendship is regarded as a relationship that goes beyond the traditional material or social ties associated with close bonds of friendship. Friendships do not simply appear, but are cultivated and influenced by the contexts under which they are constructed (Allan, 1998). By sharing a meal with neighbors, strong friendship ties
have been created. There are several of the attendees that take trips together, spend holidays at one another’s homes, and offer assistance during times of need.

**Travelin’ Together**

Through the close bonds of friendship, a core group of friends has developed from family dinner. This core group of friends travels together for weekend trips and even longer vacations. Whether traveling with a best friend or a group of friends, everyone can benefit from some time away from the ordinary day-in day-out routines that can burden our friendships. Traveling with friends creates lifetime memories and strengthens friendship bonds, or does it?

In an earlier project I conducted with my colleague, Libby Jeter, a travel incident that took place among the participants was revealed in a group interview. The incident involved our second neighborhood cruise together. The cruise was to celebrate my birthday, as well as the anniversary of another couple on the cruise. Decorations were ordered for the anniversary couple, but the cruise ship employees accidentally decorated the room with birthday items. The couple accused me of ordering the decorations to be vindictive since, according to them, I felt their anniversary was overshadowing my birthday plans. It was petty and childish, but the accusation set the tone for the rest of the cruise, and spoiled an event that had been such a success the previous year. The first cruise created life-long memories and strengthened friendships, but the second cruise created a division among those previously formed bonds when conflict entered the equation.
Thanksgiving with the Gays

It’s not surprising that when you’re 1000 or 2000 miles away from your family the holidays can be lonely, or at least different. I’ve spent my share of holidays alone—or with the family of a friend. Either way I began to view holidays away from loved ones simply as an adjustment. I always understood that my friend’s intent was good—that I not be alone on the holidays. Still, being thrust into the rituals and customs of a family you don’t know can almost be worse than spending the holiday alone, reminding you that you’re an outsider. I always felt that this was “my plight” or “just something I’d deal with” every year or so when I wasn’t able to travel home for the holidays. I was at a stage in my life where I thought that a significant relationship was not in the cards for me. I never really considered that I’d have my own family with whom to spend holidays.

Being from a family that didn’t want to acknowledge my sexual orientation created its own barriers to this dilemma. In my early 30’s, as I was coming out, I remember thinking through the details of what my life might be like if I ever found a life partner. I think that in some ways being alone on the holidays was my own litmus test to see how I handled it, and to determine how my family dealt with my absence. Overall, it wasn’t difficult, and became less so every year.

In 1999, when I met my partner, I realized, rather abruptly, that he was going to be in my life, for the rest of my life. I believe it was then that I wished for things to be different—that we could enjoy the company of one another travelling together on the holidays. Of course, there was a part of me that realized I really didn’t want to subject him to having to spend time with my family, considering that I was now used to being away from them during the holidays most years anyway. What we have decided for now is to travel separately to our respective hometowns one year on either Thanksgiving or
Christmas and spend the next year together, away from our families. Even on the years we visit our birth families, we make it a point to be together on either the Thanksgiving or the Christmas in which we do not spend with our respective families. Additionally, we have begun establishing our own traditions for the holidays.

By the time that we bought our second home together, family dinner was well established. We had developed very strong bonds with our neighbors (friends), and we labeled ourselves the “core group.” We had spent some holidays with our extended family, and even though it wasn’t awkward, Steve and I began to desire creating our own traditions. It was that year that we had our first “Orphan’s Thanksgiving Dinner” at our home. We invited others (both gay and straight friends, although mostly gay) who were not going home for the holidays. As talk about this event spread, other friends expressed interest in attending. Somewhat to our surprise, one couple even asked if they could bring their parents, as they wanted to spend the day with us! For me, that was one of the defining moments of the development of our extended family. Our friends were making choices to be with us instead of (or in conjunction with) what had, for many, become known as an obligatory day with relatives. That day, we had sixteen people at our home for Thanksgiving dinner and it was one of the best holidays that I’ve spent in years. After dinner, we visited more and ended up with an impromptu game night that lasted well into the next morning before the first guest/family member left.

It is important, I think, to note that I do not have an estranged relationship with everyone in my blood-family. In fact, my relationship is rather decent with my mother and brother despite the rather distant nature of our relationship. However, I truly find the holidays that I have spent with my family of choice to be the most memorable. Since that first Thanksgiving, my partner and I have spent nearly every Christmas or Thanksgiving
with one or several of our extended family members. It’s here that we’re truly accepted and it’s where we feel we belong. It is also during the holiday seasons that we want to be with our family.

**Lean on Us**

Bradley, in his personal interview, shared a story of how the friendship formed with Steve and me over the years helped him get through his break-up.

**Bradley**

I was so appreciative of the help I received when Jack and I broke up. Due to financial ties, it was necessary for us to keep living together even after breaking up. We were in the process of selling our house, which is stressful in and of it-self. Add a separation on top of that, and it becomes a tremendously stressful situation to deal with while still living with an ex. We finally sold the house, but then I had nowhere to live. I didn’t want to rush into buying something else, nor did I want to rent an apartment and be locked into a long lease. I didn’t even have to ask. I just mentioned my situation and David and Steve offered one of their spare bedrooms at no charge for as long as I needed to stay because that’s what friends, who have become like family, do for one another. There are no expectations, but there is always a helping hand in times of need. We can truly count on one another. That’s the type of devotion that has been extended to the familial bonds that I have been fortunate enough to know over the course of the time that I have been involved with family dinner.
Reflections on the Literature

The literature given supports the claim friendship bonds can and are forged over the sharing of a meal. Through the sharing of food, bonds can be created by getting to know individuals for who they are, instead of whom or what we think they represent. There is also support for the secondary claim of how food or the close personal bonds forged through food sharing that reveal how conflict can be managed and dilemmas negotiated.

My research is in line with these claims, but what the literature doesn’t cover fully is how food and the formation of close bonds construct a microcosm of society relative to ideas of inclusion and practices that accept not only the gay members of the Seminole Heights community, but also the non-traditional family structures represented by family dinner attendees, i.e. single-parent households, and married heterosexual couples without children. Through the idea of acceptance, there is an environment that is mostly free from the fear, shame, or guilt since the organization structure itself has an emphasis on familial bonds and mutual support among its members as a main goal, the autonomy to be "who you are" found a structural support within the organization.
Large Portions of Social Capital

What becomes significant from these social interactions and relational bonds is the ability to realize that these social commitments manifest themselves into social capital (Block, 2008). Social capital is defined as “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1993, pp. 35-36). This definition is also similar to that of Field and Schuller (2000). Social capital is enacted through various forms of social support for the members of the community (Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006; Vargas, 2008). Thus, social capital becomes a desired benefit and a way to strengthen the bonds of friendship and community. Gambrill and Paquin (1992) added to the discussion of how close friendship ties between neighbors can be a source of social support. For weekly dinner participants, support comes by way of the social capital created through their attendance and continued interaction.

Social capital can be both a private good and a public good; it benefits both the participant and the nonparticipants alike (Putnam, 1995). Social capital is about connections. The networks created through family and friends can provide the beginning of social capital for individuals, which can be used in a crisis, for profit, or for enjoyment (Fukuyama, 1995; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).
An important mean for developing social capital is through finding commonality amongst the residents of the community. Commonality helps create a sense of trust. Without maintaining mutual trust toward and respect for each other, the foundation for building social capital is not present. Trust becomes a key component in building social capital; the level of trust is related to the interactions of the dinner participants. Similarities can be made to game theory wherein success depends upon a certain level of cooperation between two or more “players” (Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991).

**Building Trust**

Establishing trusting relationships encourages a more egalitarian view of the social capital created, which helps maintain group solidarity (Coleman, 1990). By creating a network based on interacting through mutual community engagement, greater social capital is created. Social capital can yield a value which can be interpreted as a return on an investment to facilitate action within an organization (Light, 2004) and build a higher level of trust. Trust is paramount to successful relationships as it is inherent in building knowledge that is tacit (Jones & George, 1998) and which is formed through the interactions of family dinner. The success of family dinner is based upon the trust that it creates within the community through the nourishment of social capital, which is sustained by the interactions of the participants.

Trust increases the quality of the social capital developed through networks of reciprocation. The quality of social capital can be measured through the reciprocal nature of trust (Putnam, 1993) among family dinner participants. Trust is an important aspect of social capital between and within organizations. Along with trust comes the expectation and acceptance of reciprocity, which expands on the cyclical nature of social capital.
Social capital is built upon a give *and* receive system. By using skills that complement one another, each person’s contribution becomes an asset to the community that appreciates to the level of social capital that is not only perceived, but also the actual social capital produced. The return does not have to be immediate, but the expectation of return at some point in the future is understood (Hutchinson, 2004).

Social capital is an invisible form of community wealth as it is built upon unseen social structures and relationships that form the foundation of networks (Koniordos, 2008). Basic foundations of social networks develop in a multitude of ways for various organizations. No matter how the foundations of social networks are formed, it is important to realize that the bonding that is inherent in building social capital can possibly be perceived as placing limits, despite efforts of the organization to be inclusive (Field, 2003). Inherently, some individuals are simply going to contribute more than others, but the contributions begin by bridging social capital.

**Bridging**

Bridging social capital refers to making connections between individuals who are dissimilar from one another but share a common interest, goal, or are linked to the same issue. For example, building a stronger community might be listed as one of the common goals for attending family dinner. Bridging social capital often leads to the formation of relationships among groups who hold different views (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), which increases the social capital of the formulated groups. Among the participants of family dinner, there are people who claim no religious affiliations, and people who are active participants in the local churches and synagogues. There are Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and Libertarians who share few political views. Bridging
social capital is therefore often more difficult to shape and build, but no less important to achieve. Bridging social capital between individuals of varying opinions helps to navigate differences (Putnam, 2000) as participants begin to reframe their understanding of their differences. Without the exchange of social capital, we separate ourselves from those whom we perceive as different, rather than trying to bridge the connections to other aspects that we can agree upon.

Bridging and linking are cyclical proponents of social capital through the communicative process of engagement, social networks, collective action, and social benefits. Bridging and linking can be presented as methods to enhance and strengthen the creation and sustainability of social capital and healthy neighborhoods.

While elements of social capital are apparent in every community, there needs to be a means to strengthen and increase the social capital. We live in a very individualistic society; however, we can recognize the contributions that we are able to bring to a community. By understanding our community, we are able to see where our particular skills can be used. By learning about a community or organization, the benefits of social capital can be realized. There needs to be a sense of community among the stakeholders before they can foster the idea of community. An important source of social cohesion is finding commonality amongst the participants of family dinner.

Social capital generates a cohesive quality (see Gewirtz et al., 2005), which capitalizes on “the presence of effective human networks...which are manifested in effective institutions and processes where people can cooperate for mutual advantage” (Landman, 2004, p. 38). Mutual advantages in working partnerships garner strength through shared goals and trust (Billet et al., 2007).
Participation among those who participate in family dinner offers a sense of self-worth. The skills each attendee brings to the table are acknowledged through participatory efforts. Acknowledgement establishes confidence and creates an environment within which the stakeholders become more engaged in the general goals of the community (Narayan & Cassidy, 2001). Participation increases the positive experience of partnerships. In theory, the acknowledgement that comes through participation changes attitudes; the changed attitudes increase people skills, which in turn increases the effectiveness of everyone in the community. The combined sequence creates strengthened social capital.

Increased social capital does not mean there will always be cohesion amongst the participants; communal activities, especially among new members, can contribute effectively to create a shared sense of community. Shared communal activities have given individuals a means by which to extend their relationship beyond formal ones to those of social/friendship networks, thereby “bridging social capital” (Rawlins, 2009, p. 197). This is evidenced through social events such as community picnics and holiday gatherings. Through learning about and understanding community members in social settings, we build interactional and relational bonds.

We are not always going to see the path to achieve our goals in the same ways as others. There are going to be disagreements from time to time, but, due to the strengthening of the social capital gained through community activities, the conflicts can be more easily negotiated or even avoided. The creation of social capital plays a key factor in disputes among organizational stakeholders; there is a tendency toward more cooperation among those whom you consider to be friends. While not all conflicts will be reconciled, there will be a mutual respect developed, which can only be garnered
through a personal knowledge of participants. A resolution to agree to disagree may not be the best resolution available, but at least it leaves the door open for continued discussion. It is through established trust within a community that allows differences to be tabled for further discussion.

This social capital becomes a desired benefit for the stakeholders, as well as, a way to strengthen the bonds of community and friendship among participants. The social capital created becomes a signifier—“you can count on me.” This “count on me” attitude is dependent on the environment. The environment in which organizations operate can create a strengthening of social capital, or create a loss of social capital. It is through communication among networks that collaboration takes place and creates positive social capital. The collaborative process is a communicative act that stresses the roles of social capital and communication processes in shaping successful community efforts. Communication creates the collaborative process.

The more collaborative efforts that are made by a community, the greater strengths the community’s social capital reach (Keyton & Stallworth, 2002). The space of the community may be defined by geographical boundaries, or by its membership. Broadening one or both of these parameters increases the overall effectiveness of building social capital within communities. By broadening boundaries, the community incorporates stakeholders from different environments and increases their ability to be more effective in more diverse situations (Cummings, 2004). A more effective community is better able to achieve shared goals (Putnam, 1993). The creation of social networks can be achieved through bridging social capital, but the cooperation of the stakeholders is the key element in establishing the success of any organization.
Additionally, trust and shared goals create effective working partnerships. Trust is gained or given based, in part, upon the social capital gained through the exchange of services. Having achieved a shared set of values and a strong network on which to rely does not protect communities from creating a sense of exclusion on the part of some members. The bonding that is inherent in building social capital can also be perceived as limiting, despite efforts to be inclusive (Field, 2003). Inherently, some individuals are simply going to contribute more than others, but the contributions begin by bridging social capital. Action and accountability are reciprocal relations that develop through the trust that is formed and strengthened through this cyclical process. These cyclical processes are what have helped sustain family dinner through a desire to build community.

**Engagement, Networks, Collective Action, and Benefits**

The frequent starting point in this cyclical process is *engagement* with a problem or issue that requires or benefits from collective participation in solving the problem or issue. Stakeholders are able to engage with their social networks through action. Most actions come at a time of crisis or perceived harm (Tilly, 1973). Collective action occurs when community members put aside differences to prevent or allow actions that affect the community/organization at large that would otherwise go unchecked (Ostrom, 1990). Clary, et al. (1994) found that a perceived risk important to the majority of the stakeholders has a higher propensity for engagement. Engagement is that which creates bonds that hold communities together and benefits in a unified effort by participants (Kay, 2006).
Social interactions develop into relational bonds (Block, 2008), which form networks. Networks are made up of individuals, companies, groups, etc. and the relations between these individuals, companies, groups, etc. Society is comprised of networks made from these relations, which build long-lasting ties of social capital. To understand social capital, there has to be an understanding of the network from which social capital is being derived. This is because the relationship between two or more individuals, companies, groups, etc. is the building block of a network. The relationship demonstrates its social capital through the flow of resources that can be material or non-material. The resources might include social support, emotional support, time, information, expertise, or collective action (Resnick, in press).

Collective action connects people who have shared interests and identifies the contributions of the individuals based upon those shared interests (Flanagin et al., 2006). Understanding the way in which people communicate helps to understand what actions are offered and/or desired by individuals. Cathy shares an example of collective action. Cathy details an experience during which her neighbor’s home had been burglarized. Barbara, the neighbor, asked Cathy if she had seen anything unusual, since Cathy works from home. Cathy had not seen anything, nor had James who also works from home and lives behind Barbara. Cathy and James were both disheartened regarding their inability to provide any helpful information. They promised to be more aware and start watching out for each other’s property thereby putting a collective action into place.

Collective action begins with a common purpose. Purpose is realized through the mission statement of a company or in a community’s effort to assist neighbors. A colleague was recently burglarized. Two major events took place as a result of the
break-in in terms of collective action. First, the immediate geographically bound community began a communicative act of discussing the dangers of not being more observant. The discussions led to a development of social capital. There was an exchange of services—I will watch out for your property, and you watch out for mine. The exchange lead to a trust that was absent before the break-in occurred. The other collective action took place through the work community. When we heard of the break-in, an effort was made to collect money as a way of assisting a member of the community. The collective action of the community strengthened bonds through shared goals resulting in benefits.

*Benefits* are established through shared goals. Adam & Roncevic (2003) stated, “Social capital has facilitated a series of very important empirical investigations and theoretical debates which have stimulated reconsideration of the significance of human relations, of networks, of organizational forms for the quality of life and of developmental performance” (p. 177), which are the benefits.

Furthermore, there is an exchange of skill and/or knowledge, which creates an environment for growth and acceptance among the members of a community. While many of the contributions may be individual, the action has an equalizer, which is represented by the benefits the contributions bring to the community. “It is equitable because it is measured only by need and capacity to utilize, not by extraneous factors which deprive in order that another may take and have” (Dewey, 1984, p. 329). Non-use and abuse of benefits decreases the value of social capital. Social capital is not to be hoarded; it is a resource. Unlike most forms of capital, social capital has to be given away for it to increase. An increase in social capital not only contributes to a
strengthened sense of community, but it also helps to sustain the strengthened sense of community.

The creation and sustainability of social capital is based upon a system of investments and returns (Lin, 1999). The investments are the actions that are made by the network of the community whether those efforts are an individual or group, and the benefits are the gains made in the assets available to the community through its social capital (Kay, 2006). This cycle helps to maintain the social capital by strengthening the engagement of the attendees of family dinner and the neighborhood. As attendees of the weekly dinners reciprocate the actions available due to the social capital of the neighborhood, the neighborhood strengthens as it develops from just a group of houses within a certain geographical area into a community. This is accomplished through positive views of the community made possible through the benefits of social capital.

**Gatekeepers**

The frontline gatekeepers are the first contacts with a community on the part of newcomers. Gatekeepers are the communicators within the community. The first communication by “gatekeepers” to newcomers involves the communicative act itself and should adhere to a certain level of accountability. Social accountability goes beyond performing the minimum requirements; it creates a sense of responsibility for the community’s success. Social accountability gives importance to the role of “frontline gatekeepers,” which should foster a certain level of productivity among participants to build upon the products of social capital such as cohesion and solidarity (Narcisse, 2000).

A gatekeeper is defined as a key person who transfers information through communication taking, “…an active role in both gathering information and facilitating
the communication of [group members]” (Tushman & Katz, 1980, p. 1075). The hosts of family dinner act as frontline gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are essential to the success of any organization. A lack of recognition undermines the growth of social capital by stunting the desire to assist others and/or reciprocate deeds. If the idea of social capital can be conceptualized as a positive attainment, there can be positive effects on community building (Colman, 1990; Putnam, 1993).

Frontline gatekeepers are more than greeters. People develop preconceived ideas about an individual’s worth and value. Making such judgments is detrimental to building social capital, whether the value is being made by members of a community toward non-members or vice-versa. As communities attempt to promote social capital, they should be concerned with delivering powerful and positive first impressions to non-members. People have affirmed decisions to purchase or rent homes in the neighborhood after attending one of the weekly dinner events.

By changing the role of the gatekeeper, a potential for change can be accomplished. As with any frontline gatekeeper, the social capital created within a community is through first contact/first impressions. The hosts of family dinner often are the persons of first contact, but in reality every member of a community is a frontline gatekeeper. The position of gatekeeper needs social accountability—place more ethical and social responsibility with the position. While there are hierarchal positions within communities, the social capital able to be created is beneficial to all participants/members.

While the acknowledgement of the importance of the role of “gatekeepers” gives members of communities the internal space and place to contribute to the collective social capital, there remains a need for external spaces and places to assist in the creation
and sustainability of social capital, to be part of the cyclical nature of social capital, and to strengthen the role of “gatekeepers.” Creating social networks beyond the “space” of the organization is an important component of strengthening social capital. Social gatherings conducted within the community foster a more collaborative effort to achieve shared goals (Putnam, 1993).

**Informal Gatherings**

Concentrating on developments within neighborhoods creates a walking environment, as opposed to the typical driving requirement of most neighborhoods in the U.S. Creating a space to gather allows neighborhoods to become communities by capitalizing on the relationships that are formed, which in turn produces social capital. There is an ability to build social capital through more informal gatherings. Informal gatherings, as described by Oldenburg (2000) can be easily accomplished through the conversations and other communicative acts, such as the sharing of food at family dinner. Communicative acts are offerings of support, action, or simply being present, which is why I extend Oldenburg’s (2000) concepts of third places to private homes when the home is designated as a gathering place.

Beth, in her personal interview, responds to the “third place” quality of family dinner and the host’s (gatekeeper’s) capability of ensuring a welcoming environment.

**Beth**

My husband’s and my attendance at the family dinners helped acclimate us to a new community when we first moved to Tampa. It allowed us to meet and to get to know new neighbors in an easy, somewhat seamless way as opposed to the typical
struggles that can be commonplace when you first move to a new area. It also facilitated
the building of relationships that have led to committed, lifelong friendships.

* * * * *

Lisa, during her interview, adds to the conversation regarding host homes as welcoming informal gathering places by discussing her connection to the neighborhood as we sat on her front porch watching the passing neighbors.

Lisa

I feel more connected to the neighborhood because of my attendance at family dinner. I developed friendships that I would not have been able to make otherwise. I attended regularly from the very first dinner when my daughter was an infant up until she started elementary school, which was when our bedtime routine precluded our attending the Dinners. This particular group is made up mostly of people who do not have school aged children. When my child reached a certain age, it wasn't feasible to continue attending. As a single mom, I didn't have anyone to babysit my daughter so that I could continue participating in family dinner.

During the time we did attend, however, I often referred to our family dinner group as my ‘Village People’—an ode to both the African proverb that ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ and members of The Village People musical group of the 70s. Everyone was a part of my daughter’s upbringing. I got a break from cooking/doing dishes at home and a social break; she learned to be comfortable with a broad range of people, from gay to straight, coupled to single, various ages, etc. It was great social exposure for her, allowing her to learn naturally from all sorts of loving couples and self-contented singles. Family dinner was also a time for relaxing, connecting, and enjoying those around me,
taking time to eat more slowly—to dine instead of just to eat—which includes good conversation and laughter.

* * * * *

While conducting Ginger’s interview in the comfort of her spacious living room, she adds to the conversation of the welcoming spirit of family dinner, and how she felt immediately connected to the neighbor due to the close of the family dinner event.

**Ginger**

Participating in a weekly ritual involving the sharing of food, ties us together. We have developed very close friendships as a result of our weekly potlucks. Because my husband and I do not have children, we are able to attend pretty routinely. We count on the friendships we have developed, and we consider many of these people an extended family. And like family, there are folks who attend who drive me nutty and others who I can't imagine living without. There are favorite dishes shared for which people are known. This is a sign of family to me. There are at least two houses who host the weekly potluck where I feel completely at home, like I could take my shoes off, stretch out on the couch and feel as at home as I would in my own living room.

* * * * *

Jack speaks to the communicative acts of support, action, and being present that he has found through the welcoming feel of family dinner. This was a main focus of his interview as I listened intently to his description while sitting comfortably in his living room, while sharing a class of wine. The welcoming environment provided by Jack emulates the welcoming environment of family dinner.
Jack

The support received through the friendships formed by attending family dinner may be something as simple as needing someone to watch your pet when you go out of town or needing a ride to the airport. It may seem like this type of support is not unusual or even too simple to mention outside of the close friendships that have been formed over the years. These are the types of exchanges that consistently take place among our friends. It’s nice to know that if I have to work late, which is rare for me, that I can text or call any one of several people to let my dog out and feed him. Many of us have keys to each other’s house so that we can help in an emergency or other unforeseen situation.

* * * * *

These narratives are but a few of the common occurrences that have taken place as the result of the interactions among neighbors where gatekeepers serve as the catalyst for the welcoming environment of family dinner, which encourages further interactions among residents of Seminole Heights.

**Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft**

German sociologist Tönnies (1957) distinguished between two types of human interaction: Gemeinschaft (usually translated as "community") and Gesellschaft ("society" or "association"). Tönnies argued that family and kinship were the perfect expressions of Gemeinschaft, which involve group interest. Gesellschaft, on the other hand, is an organization in which the group members are motivated to take part in the group as a result of interests and needs met by the group. Tönnies also proposed that in the real world, no group was either pure Gemeinschaft or pure Gesellschaft, but, rather, a mixture of the two groups in differing proportions. Through my observations of multiple
family dinners, it is easy to see how both of these concepts can be applied to the attendees.

Furthermore, building social capital is geared toward neighborhood action and it is usually termed "community organizing" (Walls, 1997). The frequent starting point in this process is engagement that requires or benefits from collective participation. Participants can engage with the social networks created through family dinner in a variety of ways, but the one attribution that significantly builds social capital among individuals and groups is that initial action. Most actions come at a time of need or perceived harm (Tilly, 1973).

**Observations**

Collective action occurs when community members put aside differences to prevent or allow actions that affect the community at large (Ostrom, 1990). Clary, et al. (1994) found that a task important to the majority of the community has a higher propensity for engagement. Engagement is what creates bonds that hold communities together and encourage a unified effort (Kay, 2006) to create social capital.

A prime example of the call for a unified engagement in the Seminole Heights neighborhood of Tampa, Florida occurred when Starbucks was trying to open a store at the northeast corner of Hillsborough Avenue and Central Avenue, which is next to the I-275 exit for Hillsborough Avenue—the major divider of the four quadrants of Seminole Heights. Starbucks was having some problems with the Architectural Review Commission (ARC). The ARC stated the design of the Starbucks did not fit with the character of the Seminole Heights Historic District.
The ARC wanted the building to follow historical placement and be situated at the edge of the sidewalk. That placement would have put pedestrians at risk due to the multiple lanes of traffic along Hillsborough Avenue. The ARC appeared to be ignoring the heavy traffic that could possibly have a negative effect on the business and the customers.

The Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association (OSHNA) supported the design submitted by Starbucks, and First Home Realty, a local business, led a drive to support having Starbucks come to the neighborhood. Both organizations used the social capital of family dinner as a source to encourage neighbors to go to the ARC and the City Council meetings. City Council normally goes along with ARC, but, in this case, the City Council overruled the ARC due to the overwhelming support by businesses and residents.

**Resources**

It is possible to see how the friendships developed at family dinner make available greater cultural resources, for example, in the form of information and advice offered about schools in the local area, as is demonstrated by Ball (2003) and Devine (2004), or regarding which contractors can be trusted to complete jobs that need to be done for the fairest price. Using networks of social capital in everyday exchanges with weak ties (knowing people who know people outside of the participants of family dinner) and strong ties (through the friendship networks developed among the participants of family dinner) is a viable way to strengthen friendship networks through an information exchange.
For the residents of Seminole Heights, family dinner is not the only option available in which to exchange information and services. Through a discussion that took place over a shared meal at one of the family dinner events, a need was identified to have some type of resource to offer and exchange services. Mike started a community website—Hamptonterrace.org—to provide a space for such exchanges to occur. Through this site, information for the family dinner events is also posted in addition to other information.

The website has different categories and/or groups to which neighbors can post. Aside from the information regarding family dinner, there are also categories for general contributions and inquiries such as reliable contractors, “how to” project information, and neighborhood watch information. Through the site, residents post information about neighborhood. For neighborhood watch, information about break-ins or attempts is posted, descriptions are given of unknown people walking through the neighborhood, and crime watch events are posted with times, dates, and locations. Under general information, people inquire if anyone can do certain work, services are offered, neighborhood events are posted, e.g., pumpkin parade and costume contest, Christmas caroling and luminary lighting event, Seminole Heights Home tour site, and ways to volunteer for neighborhood cleanup projects.

The third category on the website is family dinner. Here people can find out where the next dinner is going to take place, if there will be a kind of theme for the food and/or the chosen main course will be mentioned to assist in side dish preparations. Sometimes the regular rotation (location) changes due to a vacation or illness. Through the site, which participants of the weekly dinners check frequently, updated information can be shared, and others learn of the change by word of mouth. Occasionally special
guests are invited to attend and that is posted as well. For example, there was an announcement made when each of the candidates of the 2002 Tampa Mayoral race, came to family dinner. As previously mentioned, no campaigning was allowed; the visits were just a meet-and-greet situation during which we were able to get to know the candidates over a shared meal.

**Reflections on the Literature**

The observations and personal stories relayed support the research claims of the cyclical nature of social capital. Though it may not be an immediately noticeable cycle, it does appear to come back around, along with the ability of social capital to strengthen the bonds of community. Given the cyclical nature of social capital, there are certain expectancies that “what goes around, comes around;” the person who offers assistance, will be reciprocated. However, reciprocation is not behind the assistance being offered.

Through the neighborhood interaction (engagement), trust is built establishing bonds of friendship (networks). These bonds bridge our dissimilarities creating a stronger sense of community. When we are face with a challenge or desire, we come together to support or oppose (collective action). Through our common goals we form a stronger community (benefits). The stories shared represent this cyclical nature of social capital and reveal how these accounts strengthen community.
Course 6

Friendships

The social capital created through the intimacy of family dinner provides a common language that everyone can understand. Despite coming from different walks of life, through this common language, members of a community are able to engage one another as individuals or as a group, which uses social capital to attain knowledge within the community, as well as, outside the permeable borders of the community. This creates strong bonds of friendship, which enables participants to share mutual engagement and a repertoire of actions and discourse.

The Seminole Heights neighbors are often, if not daily, in contact with other community members. This tight-knit group is also facilitated by the spatial proximity of their homes, which makes it possible to find value in the concept of peripheral participation. Through peripheral participation, newcomers to family dinner learn what it means to not only participate in the weekly dinner event, but also what it means to host, how to make connections, and the value those connections play in developing social capital and building community.

The learning that takes place among the community of Seminole Heights is not just directed toward newcomers to family dinner. The new attendees also bring ways of participating from their previous communities. They are able to rely on their past experiences to bolster their understanding of the community culture of Seminole Heights,
while simultaneously offering insight into other areas of the community based upon their past experience. Thus becoming full participants in the weekly dinner event.

Friendships are the foundational development of the structure of social capital and the relationships that are formed through a process of shared knowledge. However, the mere existence of a neighborhood does not mean that friendships will be formed through interaction. There are two main characteristics that, in my view, are important in developing a stronger community.

1. The relational aspect of social capital fosters the reciprocity of knowledge, skill, or assistance that other members freely share (Hutchinson, 2004; Landman, 2004; Light, 2004).

2. The contributions made within organizations need to be understood as bridging the abilities of community membership in order to create bonds that, in turn, strengthen social capital (Burt, 1992).

The previously addressed cyclical nature of social capital is a key component of building social capital through friendship bonds. Strengthening community relations is about helping one another through a shared repertoire of stories, experiences, tools, and solutions. In so doing, these actions answer the call by Gerald Frug (1999) to build community and forge closer links with one another, no matter how dissimilar the members of that community.

Other ways in which social capital is built is through assistance to newcomers or to those that self-exclude due to health reasons or mobility issues. The extension of help that is offered beyond the community of Seminole Heights is a model that can also be applied to larger organizations and companies. The exchange of social capital fosters
interactions that help to establish trust in a relationship. Without trust, the community and social capital weakens.

The “frontline gatekeepers” of community, business, and organizations are responsible for fostering trustworthiness and commitment to building community and social capital. The responsibility for putting the creation of social capital into practice is more than just bridging individuals and groups; it is about providing resources (Lesser, 2000). Taking part, being engaged in civic matters, contributing to the needs of the community even when there is no payment for the services rendered, fosters concern and interest in the future of their communities. The problems within the community are problems for the entire community to handle, which translates into a healthy community.

**What is Community?**

There has been a great deal written on community, especially considering that which community involves (Cohen, 1985; Kanter, 1972; Putnam, 2000), but also what it means. For example, community, as a noun, represents people with common interests, but who have different goals. Community, as a verb, shows action through sharing and giving to one another. Is community found in buildings or geographical space, or is community a conceptual space with shared dialogue and participation? Is community eroding, or is it being built up?

“Community” has many meanings and can refer to groups of people linked by common identity, geography, commitment, interest, and/or concern (Jewkes & Murcott, 1996). In an effort to clarify the concept of community, Christensen and Robertson (1980) suggested that a community consists of people, living within a geographically bounded area, involved in ongoing social interaction, and with psychological ties to each
other and to the place in which they live. Communities, however, are defined not only in terms of geographic locations, but also in terms of larger networks that may be somewhat geographically dispersed, yet still be strongly connected through a sense of belonging such as the community of family dinner.

Fukuyama (1999) stated that community is not just about location and interaction; community is about bonds forged through shared values and experiences. The deeper the bonds made, the greater the sense of community. MacIntyre (1981) added that community is formed via a ritual/tradition—a tradition like family dinner. Indeed, the meaning of community evolves over time according to the social script for the time, and depends on whom the question of community is addressed. The values that are shared by the majority of the participants of family dinner have to do with nourishing a stronger community.

If we combine the view of community by Fukuyama (1999) with the view of MacIntyre (1981), which referred to community as the bonds formed through shared experiences in ritual/tradition like those of family dinner, community is enhanced through participation. Connection to community is developed through the same participation. The result of community developed through participation is a stronger sense of belonging (Crittenden, 1992). A sense of belonging ties back to having connection to place. Place matters; belonging matters. Sarason (1976) believed that the best way to achieve or have a fulfilling life is to establish a strong sense of connection to community. The connections formed through family dinner have helped to sustain and feed that strong sense of community.

The concept of community originates from the Latin word *communis*, which means “fellowship, shared relations, or feelings” (Flammang, 2009, 214). Membership in
a community is personal—an individual sense of obligation. It is impersonal as well—an official bond to a nation, official membership in an organization, or descent from a certain racial group (Flammang, 2009). Community members equally accept that they share commonalities that should be preserved—a common interest.

Community and ideas of community surface throughout the interactions and interviews conducted among the participants of this research study. Participants speak to this idea of community in the group interview, which took place in my house during one of the Wednesday night dinners. As previously mentioned, the interview was held upstairs in what was my home office, but now serves as a second den. This is the smallest room in the house, and the bookcases surrounding the small sofa enclose the space even more. There was adequate room, however, to conduct the group interview, and the close proximity added to the intimate grouping as I asked, “What is community?”

**Jack**

Community goes beyond the physical sense of living in the same neighborhood. To me community is about knowing your neighbors and being there for them in times of need and having them be there for you during your times of need. Helping one another is what it means to be part of a community. You can live within a group of homes or even a “gated community” and never experience community.

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Lisa adds to the discussion by expressing her own definition of community based upon her understanding of community through her interactions with others who attend family dinner.
Lisa

Community means a diverse group of people who have found a reason to come together, and who find beneficial reasons to be together—friendship on a communal level, family on a larger scale.

As revealed by other definitions given by participants, academics are not the only ones who view community beyond physical space. Beth expresses this sentiment in her mention of community.

Beth

Community is the support system that one creates for himself/herself in whatever form that may take. Community can include your next-door neighbor or one's relative living half way around the world. Community is not limited to one's physical space or location; it is everyone you talk to including face to face, phone, email, text, or Skype when you need to talk, really talk about a personal issue, not the check off the box chitchat kind of talk.

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Robin sees community as any set of individuals that engage in interactions with one another.

Robin

Community to me is a word that is rooted in human experience. My family is my first community. When I left home, I expanded my sense of community to include my sorority sisters at Cornell, and then came my international friends in Bratislava, my husband and his family, and finally this group of people that I am fortunate to call true
friends in Tampa. All of these groups have taken me in as an individual, fed me, clothed me, shared life with me and given me support when necessary. They are my communities because we share bonds of experience. There is nothing better than a community of people that share these bonds.

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Susan tags on to Robin’s sentiment referring to community as interaction with others.

**Susan**

Community is human connection and support—looking out for each other, trusting each other, disagreeing and challenging one another, but always working toward a common goal.

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As I listened to these views of community, I was inspired. I think a lot of people take community for granted. I don’t think I even knew what it meant to have a sense of community before moving into the Seminole Heights neighborhood. Here I have learned what it means not only to be a part of a community, but also to have community.

**Food and Community**

As a consumable, shareable, and concrete cultural material, food is an essential component of the building and preservation of communities and group identities. The preparation of ingredients and the preparation of meals reflect a concrete representation of a community’s culture and a chance for members to share meals and take part in the community identity. Similar to other cultural objects and practices such as holidays,
clothing, and related festivals, the sharing of foods allows communities to express and celebrate their cultural and religious individuality. But because food is consumed, it has a power and a value surpassing other cultural objects (Christensen & Levinson, 2003). Every time a dish is prepared and consumed in a community, the meals offered, as well as the history, beliefs, and traditions they embody, are implanted into the bodies and thoughts of all members of the community.

In several of the more encouraging depictions of community, particular institutions are viewed as foundations. From the point of view of food, the foundations comprise clubs, bars, and cafes; as well as specific types of food celebrations, like family dinner, street parties, and other related communal outdoor occasions: religious festivals such as Thanksgiving, Hanukah, and Ramadan. In all these contexts, food retains its sociable and communicative function. In numerous communities, ceremonial and festive foods strengthen ties of cultural groups (Flammang, 2009). Food is an institutionalized, but not essentially prescribed, means for individuals to bond with their tradition, a delicate type of reinforcing of civil society (Counihan, 2007). According to Flammang (2009), the unavoidable displacements of social and economic mobility forced a large number of Americans to root themselves in common foods, while simultaneously accepting the foreign foods related to their new locations.

When new people from other parts of the United States or other countries move into the neighborhood, they bring new traditions not only related to the foods that are prepared for family dinner, but also to the cultural traditions that they bring with them. We have expanded our pallets through the sharing of traditional German, Jewish, and many different Latin and Asian cultural dishes. We have learned about the Parsley Anniversary—the half-way-point to the silver anniversary or 12½ years of wedded bliss.
As the community created through the sharing of meals is nourished and expanded, we learn of other cultures and traditions that we may have never learned about if not for the extension of family and community that is offered through family dinner.

Foods help to expand hospitality and kindness outside immediate social networks into larger domains: external markets, schools, and neighborhoods. Foods provide many general issues about which to talk: Genetically modified food, judgments regarding equal food sharing and distribution, the pleasure of unsullied and tasty food, the dreariness but importance of weeding crops, and the value of recognizing important events in the cycle of life with ceremonial foods. Food provides the basis for discussions. Some members of the community campaign for greatly needed affordable housing while others campaign for growing vegetables in the backyards of their community (Ray & Srinivas, 2012). Communities, predominantly, are havens of shared purpose, public discussion, and cooperation.

**Observations**

During family dinner, Kim was discussing a California proposition mentioned by her sister who lives in California—proposition 37. Kim was expressing how passionate her sister is about the dangers of genetically modified organisms, and how Prop 37 is a law requiring companies to label genetically modified foods. Kim was stating how her sister felt that prop 37 was the best opportunity to give people the right to know if their food is genetically altered. Kim ended her part of the conversation with a quote from her sister: “Proposition 37 will end the practice of labeling foods as natural.”
**Extracurricular Research**

Since family dinner concerns the food we consume, I decided to look into genetically modified food more closely to assess the effect the discussion of such foods could possibly have on community. I learned there is overwhelming support for this proposition, and a call for support regardless of the state in which one resides. Coming together for a common cause is one aspect of building community as was discussed in Course 5 in relationship to social capital where Clary, et al. (1994) found that a task important to the majority of the community has a higher propensity for engagement. Engagement is that which creates bonds that hold communities together and encourages unified efforts (Kay, 2006). For example, the discussion of labeling genetically modified foods was raised at family dinner. That discussion evolved from the idea of strength in numbers to affect social change.

* * * *

According to Mark Bittman in a recent *New York Times* article:

Polls show Prop 37 to be overwhelmingly popular: roughly 65 percent 'for', to 20 percent 'against', with 15 percent undecided. Nationally, on the broader issue of labeling, in answer to the question of whether the Food and Drug Administration should require:

Foods that have been genetically engineered or contain genetically engineered ingredients be labeled to indicate [such ingredients], a whopping 91 percent of voters say 'yes' and 5 percent say 'no'. This is as nonpartisan as an issue gets, and the polls haven't changed much in the last couple of years.

...Prop 37 isn't a ban on foods containing genetically engineered material; it's a right-to-know law. As things stand, you can find out whether your salmon is wild
or farm-raised, and where it's from, but under existing legislation you won't be able to find out whether it contains the gene of an eel.

That has to change. We have a right to know what's in the food we eat and a right to know how it's produced. This is true even if food containing or produced using GMO's were the greatest thing since crusty bread...

If genetically engineered food is so terrific, persuade us; if it's not, well, fine. In any case, it should be up to us to buy it or not, but first we have to know what it is.

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Proposition 37 seems to represent the most basic of rights—to know what we put into our bodies. It seems odd, as I think back to the food that has been prepared for family dinner, to even be having these conversations, but genetically modified foods are a shared collective issue in the United States. At least the food that is brought to family dinner makes these connections and conversations possible.

Ties formed through the sharing of food among friends and family members are apparent. However, these ties are not invulnerable within communities. Foods allow us to relate to and within our communities: national, regional, local, religious, and racial. Community ties, similar to ties between friends and family members, are bonding agents for civic engagement as well as disengagement. For example, community ties created through family dinner have been the motivation for some residents of Seminole Heights to become more active in their neighborhood associations. For a long while, attendees of family dinner held the majority of all community-based positions. Those same community ties, however, have also been the basis for separation and disengagement.
A political rift that figuratively and literally divided the neighborhood also challenged the strength of the community that had been nourished over the years of participating in family dinner. Just as Rawlins (1983) warned, “…tensions are common in relationships. These tensions constitute subtle and covert dilemmas that must be managed if a relationship is to flourish” (p. 256). The dilemma that caused the split was an argument over the designation of Seminole Heights as a local historic district. There was a group that fought the designation. The same group filed a petition that was granted by the city to separate a small quadrant of Seminole Heights, Hampton Terrace, from the larger neighborhood association. Neither the processes of becoming a local historic district, nor the seceding from the larger neighborhood association was managed well. Some people were very verbal about the situation, placing blame on other neighbors and community members. As thoughts were expressed regarding the split in the neighborhood during family dinner, some attendees grew tired of the conversations, which often ended up, for the most part, being negative. The negativity witnessed caused a few attendees to stop or limit their attendance at the weekly dinners. Even though Hampton Terrace did for their own neighborhood association, the residents are still considered to be a part of the Seminole Heights community.

**Familial Bonds and Community**

During the interview process, questions regarding support networks brought about definitions/examples of the familial bonds formed through family dinner, which go beyond exclusively biological ties. Throughout each of the participants’ lives, friends, community members, and exes filled the roles of support generally associated with traditional family members. These extensions of *family* reveal the creation of alternative
family forms recognized as a family of choice (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Often, when asked, attendees of family dinner comment on how narrow some people’s view of family has become. They detail how familial bonds extend the definition of family to all members of a community.

Family dinner has been described as a “place where it is easy to be who you are.” The Seminole Heights community is diverse, consisting of heterosexual and homosexual singles and couples. The heterosexual members of the community are not just tolerant of the homosexual population; they are accepting, which is why there are such close bonds between the gay and straight communities within Seminole Heights. These familial bonds reach beyond our differences of sexuality, religion, age, political affiliation, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity. Seminole Heights is a predominately white neighborhood, which demonstrates how community reflects the identity of those who attend family dinner and the close familial bonds created. While association with mixed heterosexual and homosexual couples sounds problematic, the community formed through the familial bonds is what has myself and others referring to this close friendship network as family. As Mike pointed out in the group interview: “Let’s face it; that’s what we are—family.”

For many of the participants, belonging to a specific group that reflects something about who they are enhances their day-to-day relations with their community members. They view family dinner as a venue that provides comfort to the extent that there is a feeling of family even for those attending for the first time. Family dinner is a gateway to building the close personal bonds that reflect a healthy community. The weekly dinner event provides the opportunities to engage with others in a family atmosphere. Through attendance, many of the participants are able to foster relationships with others who with whom they can find comfort and community.
During the group interview, several people contributed to their understanding of the bonds formed that helped build community. Cathy and Steve extend the group conversation of community to include concepts of close bonds and friendship.

Cathy

I think community, too, is feeling a responsibility for not only your neighbors, but also feeling a responsibility for the area in which you live, for improving the area, for, I don’t know, being there for your neighbors and friends through participation when others are in need.

Steve

A community, enough of a community for me to be proud to be a part of it, by definition would be one in which one’s neighbors watch out for you when you’re gone, or they say hello when you walk outside. That’s what a lot of people talk about when they say they are friendly with their neighbors. However, community is more than just that; it’s about helping one another and being available when there is a need. Most of all, community is about trusting one another. You have to be able to count on each other to get through this thing called life.

Social Capital and Community

Onyx and Bullen (2000) stated that social capital contains five main themes: networks, reciprocity, trust, shared norms, and social agency. The networks of Seminole Heights are formed through the strong ties of familial relationships and the weak ties of outside associations—the second tier relationships of those known via other means than
through family dinner. The stories shared of neighbors helping neighbors are an example of the strong bonds that have nourished the exchange of social capital through the network of family dinner. The branching off of neighborhood groups such as the Garden Club or Bicycle Club are examples of weak ties—their memberships are composed of neighbors other than those who attend family dinner.

The help that is offered is offered freely, but with the expectation of reciprocity (Hutchinson, 2004). This exchange of aid, information, and meals builds trust among those who share the close bonds of friendship developed. Through the interactions of the participants of family dinner, shared norms are developed. Social norms are unwritten *rules* for the expectations of those who attend. For example, everyone is expected to bring a contribution to the meal; we make announcements about upcoming events in which attendees might desire to participate, but we don’t, for the most part, make announcements about political/religious events unless they are all-inclusive. The observance of these practices helps to strengthen the bonds and encourage the exchange of social capital, which, in turn, creates social agency—the stronger the bonds, trust, and exchange of social capital, the stronger the likelihood that others will seek out more information/interaction (Leonard & Onyx, 2003).

The main point to consider in this exchange is that social capital needs to be developed over time in order to be a viable and sustainable part of any organization. People have come and gone over the years that family dinner has been observed, but the social capital created stays. The continued participation of family dinner keeps the production of social capital and helps maintain a strong community despite the natural changes that occur within any group/organization. The social aspect of family dinner is a result of the social capital that is created.
Reflections on the Literature

The shared norms that are created through interaction are not the typical social norms. Typically, shared norms reflect similarities in groups (McElreath, Boyd, & Richardson, 2003). However, the attendees of family dinner share few similarities at first glance; they dress differently, talk differently, and act differently. Yet, similarities are discovered through the sharing of a meal. Even gender norms are challenged. The men, who are in heterosexual relationships, often prepare the dish that is shared at the weekly dinners. It is also the men that mostly cleanup after the dinners or during the course of conversations, as some people help clean as the night progresses.
Sweet Benefits

I have struggled with a sense of connection to place most of my life. I think that the strong connection that I have now is not to Seminole Heights, but to family dinner and the participants of this weekly event. Family dinner saved me; it was my salvation. The harm that family dinner protected me from was self-inflicted in that I was constantly running away while simultaneously trying to find myself. I was destroying myself even as I was beginning to make connections to place. If not for the connections made through family dinner, I would have, like every other time in my life, found a reason to leave despite having the support of an amazing and loving partner. Family dinner grounded me even more than my partner ever could; it connected me to others beyond my partner; it made me a part of a community. That’s what I mean when I say it saved me.

I have known very few people who feel they are a part of a friendship network that is as committed to one another as the network built from the attendance of family dinner. I do realize that not everyone has the same sense of connection to the friendship bonds as I do. Those I refer to as friends, however, do feel as strong a bond of friendship to me as I do to them. I have often spoken of how much I value friendships and find them to be similar to marriage, just without the sex and the communal property, bills, and other day-to-day expenses. There is, however, just as much trust, faith, and commitment in a strong friendship as there is in any committed marriage (at least in my opinion). It is
that level of trust, faith, and commitment within the close-knit friendships that have been nourished and sustained through participation in family dinner.

It is within this setting, and with this ideal of ingredients, which nourish the community of which I now speak. The degree or level of friendship created requires respect for each person’s uniqueness. Ultimately, everything is better when it is shared with a close circle of friends. It is this circle of friends that has been a major factor in reestablishing community in my life. Community has been the most significant factor for me in reaching my dreams. Without the support of my partner and community, I would never have allowed myself to reach for my dream of continuing my education. Other neighbors were inspirational to me in their attempts and successes at furthering their education. Community support opens up possibilities beyond the every day by sharing the values we hold as that community.

I mentioned that I am not sure if the support of my partner would have been enough to keep me grounded, but I think that it is our involvement in community that keeps our relationship rich and fulfilled. I think that family dinner has enhanced my life, and I hope that my life—my participation—has enhanced not only family dinner, but my community as well.

I have completed my undergraduate degree, my Masters, and now I will soon be graduating with my Ph.D. Being involved in the community of Seminole Heights, however, has made me realize that my accomplishments mean nothing without the support of my family—my community. Family dinner brings purpose to my successes because I am able to share that success with those I love.

I discussed the bonding of friendships that have been made through family dinner. Perhaps there will be some overlap here in this chapter, but I want to move beyond the
bonding process and share, hopefully, deeper meanings of family dinner that may reflect both positive and negative effects of developing such close relationships with neighbors. These are solicited comments from five of the participants of this research study. Some of the following statements are from people I consider to be my family, but, to present other views, some are taken from people whom I do not consider to be part of my family of choice. This is not to say that I do not appreciate these individuals; I do appreciate them, but do not see them outside of community events.

Bradley

Family dinner is about participation and involvement. It started in Hampton Terrace when we were all early adopters of an area that was considered sketchy by a lot of people. It was surrounded on three sides, at least, by very poor neighborhoods or risky neighborhoods. We were all young professionals without children, and we all got together at the same place, at the same time, and needed a sense of safety and community. That’s what family dinner represents to me—safety. I think we were all ready at the moment for this kind of thing. Family dinner is unusual, and probably will not be replicated very easily in other places.

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Bradley’s remark “…at the same place, at the same time…” represents the desire of more than just my need for connection.

Cathy

Family dinner is educational, and it’s a chance to get to know your neighbors. Years ago, like before we moved into the neighborhood, I don’t know if I would have
been able to tell anyone what it would be like to have a gay friend, or what the gay lifestyle looked like, or what it didn’t look like. I mean I didn’t really have much of a frame of reference. It’s really refreshing that my gay friends live the same life that I live. I wish that a lot more people could see that because it’s really disappointing in this day and age knowing people in this world haven’t had exposure to different people. People tend to separate themselves reasoning that ‘they’re different from me.’ Actually, they’re not. We have many more similarities than dissimilarities.

It makes us more of an advocate. We aren’t out there marching in parades, but I have heard Marc have conversations with his mother and get pretty irate. ‘Well mom, what makes you think…[whatever it is that she is saying that makes no sense to us]?’ I think that by participating in family dinner you just think differently because you get to know people on a deeper level. You hear something negative about people you love and it is impossible not to stand up for them. It’s funny. My parents refer to our gay friends as ‘the guys.’ It’s just generic, ‘the guys,’ and I’m like ‘Who mom? They have names.’

I think family dinner is fantastic for what it is. I sit at dinner with people that I have never met and think this is great. I may never have the opportunity to meet them outside of family dinner. Will I develop a close personal relationship with everyone that I meet? Probably not and that is fine. I do not have to build close bonds with every person that attends family dinner. I think that I have a core group of friends that have developed out of the dinners that have become more than just friends. I also have a lot of close acquaintances that I know well enough to be able to depend on them if I need something or vice versa. That’s what family dinner contributes; it is a way to make connections with people that you may have never had the opportunity to meet otherwise.
Meeting people is one of the things that I love about the weekly dinners. Family dinner offers a platform where different people can come in, connect with other people, and feel like part of a community. I think after you have been involved with family dinner for a while that it changes your outlook on the world. It makes it a lot easier to say hello to somebody.

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I found Cathy’s response about not knowing what a “gay lifestyle looked like” interesting. Cathy is also the one who talked about how her mom references her gay friends as “the guys.” She and her husband Marc stand up for their friends, but I am not sure if they would have stood up for gay rights in general before their attendance at family dinner. Cathy spoke about family dinner being “educational.” It is an education when any attendee of the dinners can learn that we are all the same despite our religious beliefs, political affiliations, and sexual orientations. Cathy and Marc are two of my and Steve’s closest friends. This friendship/familial bond developed over a shared meal. Words fail me when I try to explain what this accomplishment means. Steve and I are not the “gay friends” of Cathy and Marc. We are simply their friends. Period. The only classification used between us is friend/family.

Beth

Family dinner allowed for so much interaction when we were new to the neighborhood/community. Moving here without knowing anyone was difficult for us, but family dinner was more than making connections with others. Family dinner was building trust and a network of extended family of whom you could depend upon for help or just a good conversation. When you are so far from family, it helps to have the kind of
kinship that family dinner allows us to develop with one another. Whether you are close to your family or not, it is comforting to have such close friends as neighbors.

Family dinner is also quite convenient and consistent. It was nice having a break during the week from preparing a full meal, and knowing that break was always an option. Imagine how nice it would be if everyone had a night that there was an option to just fix a large salad or desert and walk over to a neighbor’s house and be treated to a wonderful dinner and great conversation.

Our life style is quite different now. We have children that were not part of the equation at the time, and we don’t feel that family dinner fits into the schedules of younger children. Family dinner is simply too late; it also interferes with the routines that we have established with our children. It’s not that we think that the dinners are not child friendly, but the time of the dinners make them somewhat exclusionary for those of us who have smaller children.

Our social needs have also changed. While we still maintain close friendships with a few of the people that we met through family dinner, we do not have the same social needs to make connections to our neighborhood. We focus all of our attention on creating our family as a singular function and not so much as a communal one. Therefore, unfortunately, family dinner does not fit into our lives now.

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While I miss having Beth and her husband James attend family dinner, I love Beth’s use of interaction. Interaction is key to building bonds. I also am drawn to her discussion of social needs, and how those needs change. I think that is why we do not have that many children in attendance at family dinner. It is not that children are not welcomed, but the social needs of the family unit have changed. A large percentage of
Seminole Heights are homeowners without children. Perhaps this is the reason that family dinner has been successful for so many years. The dinners meet the social needs of the residents, which strengthen our community.

Ginger

Family dinner is a way to rejuvenate. If my husband and I have been out of town, it's like we can't wait to see everybody and hear about what everyone has been up to and all that we have missed while being gone. Even when we are out of town, we are connected by texting and often communicate with others during or immediately after family dinner to see who attends, what is happening in the neighborhood, and what food was brought. We want to know if there was any news to get caught up, whether the news is good or bad.

I really view family dinner as something pretty sacred. So many of us do not have family close by and to have a sit down meal with so many neighbors is adding to that family extension. There seems at times to be such disconnect from...well, everything at times. We get so caught up in work and personal issues that we can kind of forget about each other. We don’t mean to, but it happens.

We lose sight of the people who are important to us. Family dinner reminds us to look out for each other; it brings together people who we can spend time with, love, enjoy, appreciate, and talk to from all walks of life. It doesn't matter whether people are rich or poor anybody is welcomed. I feel our neighborhood values the different class levels that are present too. But really, this weekly get together is about food and a human connection, no matter who you are. It's such an amazing thing that this community has
kept this going. I mean, who does a routine of a weekly get together consistently for dinner? I think you may find it more among churches in the US, but in neighborhoods?

Human connection and support are so important, and that is what family dinner is about. It’s about looking out for each other, trusting each other, disagreeing and challenging each other, but always working towards building community.

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Human connection, rejuvenation, and support these concepts stood out to me as I listened to Ginger. These concepts are why I have made such strong attachments to family dinner. When people attend these dinners, there is always an exchange of hugs. Touch, laughter, and relaxation are all ways the attendees of family dinner are rejuvenated.

**Susan**

I think that having the same event with the same people can get boring. Maybe some of the new blood, so to speak, with the younger people moving in to the neighborhood will be a good thing. I think a transition of some sort is needed, something to bring a more positive aspect to the dinners again. For me, family dinner has more of a negative feel. I have pulled away from the event for many reasons. Some of those reasons I will share in the hope that they can benefit family dinner in some way.

The concept of family dinner is a great idea, and I think that it has had its moments as positive expressions of family and community. By pulling away, however, I have gotten to interact with a whole new set of neighborhood people that I would not have gotten to know if we were still more of a part of the dinners. From meeting and getting to know others, I learned that there is a perception that not everyone is welcomed
to attend family dinner. Part of the reason for this belief of exclusivity, is the perceived secret schedule of the family dinner. When you have to be invited, feel that you need to be invited, or think you have be included on a web site in which it is required (or perceived to be) that you live in a certain geographical location, people are most definitely excluded or feel excluded from family dinner. There needed to be an awareness of this perception of exclusion.

Facebook was not around when family dinner was started. Perhaps the website is even exclusive in its name\textsuperscript{7} and could be replaced with a Facebook account that reaches out to a greater representation of the neighborhood instead of who is allowed to be on a website. While I think that a Facebook account would be more inviting, I think it is too late for some people to ignore their perception of being excluded. The first drink of water is tainted and you can’t get that back.

I think that there is also an issue with some of the clientele of the dinners. I think for me, and for most of the people that I know that no longer attend family dinner, there was not an issue with the high number of gay individuals. There was, however, an issue with the conversations that were going on during the dinners—conversations that were not appropriate, in my opinion, for dinner conversation. Perhaps some of the uneasiness was prejudice (prejudice is out there and shows up everywhere), but I know that I was put off from some of the conversations I overheard. You can say that you want to be inclusive, but when people are inappropriate in their conversations making others feel uncomfortable that is not being inclusive.

\textsuperscript{7} The Website referred to is HamptonTerrace.Org—Hampton Terrace is simply where family dinner began, but it grew beyond the geographical boundaries. There is no requirement to live in Hampton Terrace in order to be added to the site.
I think another issue for me was how big family dinner got for a while there; it was too big. I think that someone should have formed another dinner night branching off from the success of what was happening forming their own family dinner, and perhaps some kind of system should have been in place to help others to start one—maybe some type of mentorship that would have given the support and blessing from the larger group to make it evident that ties were not being broken by attending the new groups so that others would not feel obligated to continue attending the larger group.

Like everything else, things ebb and flow. During the 80 plus number of attendees, maybe there should have been a charge. It’s expensive and when you realize that there is not enough food and you run to the store or raid your cabinet for something more, which adds to the expense of hosting. I think, as a group, we should have discussed how to solve the problems associated with the growth of family dinner; we needed to figure out a way around the issue of the high attendance.

Asking people to give money probably would have been one way to reduce attendance, but there are some people who want to attend that can’t afford to give much in the way of cash donations. Perhaps a sponsorship could have been put in place where people who had the means to do so could have contributed more so that others would not have to be burdened by the cash requirement. Family should be willing to help each other out after all. Perhaps more communication of the needs and hardships of being a host might have changed some of the perceptions that the attendance was not such a burden on the hosts.

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If more individuals would look past classifications and see people for who they are, perhaps Susan’s report of discrimination would not have even been a point of
conversation during my interview with her. While I was surprised that my conversation with Susan was as positive as it was (I do consider it positive), I still left our meeting feeling a little beat-up. Susan and her husband were not part of the core group to which I have referred, but they were becoming key members in the Wednesday night dinners. They even joined us on our European cruise. As I look back at their withdrawal and the negativity surrounding it, I think that they wanted to be acknowledged for their participation in the neighborhood. Family dinner is not about recognition for individual contributions; it is about having the opportunity to interact with one another on a regular basis. Through interaction, we get to know one another as we build a stronger sense of community.

This was definitely the most negative view of family dinner even though it included several positive comments. I wanted to make sure that I shared this view with the reader. It is easy for me to get lost in the positives, but I did not want to give the reader the sense that everyone loves family dinner. There have even been a few people that attended only once. While I could not arrange to have these individuals to be a part of this study, I do know, through conversations with these individuals at other locations, they considered the event “too weird” and “too personal” for their liking. As Bradley stated, we came together at the same time and were ready for something like family dinner. Perhaps Susan and her husband were not ready.

**Reflections on the Narratives**

The narratives all speak to the community aspect of family dinner. These are the narratives that push me to continue being a host. There are negative comments scattered throughout this dissertation, but no matter how many pages may be occupied by negative
remarks, it is the positive remarks that leave the greatest impression. I know that I have
an overly positive attitude toward these dinners, but they have positive affects on me. I
cannot imagine where I would be or what my life would be like now without having these
dinners in them.

Academically, this dissertation adds to the discourse of what it means to study
one’s own community. It makes a major contribution, I believe, to the idea of “third
place.” As such, it expands the idea of third place beyond a physical location and
considers the use of the space as the primary method of designating third place.
However, nothing contributes anything more important to me, than the connections and
bonds nourished over a shared meal.
The Monologues

The following four conversations are representative of the overall opinions and views of family dinner. There is a monologue from a long-term attendee of family dinner who has been a little put off by some of the nuances of family dinner as of late. There is a representation of someone who has separated herself from the *politics* of family dinner. The third monologue is from a newer attendee who became very active in the ritual of family dinner, but took a job out of state. Finally, there is an interview of a newer attendee who does not share the views of some of the long time attendees.

Bradley is a long time attendee of family dinner, who now limits his attendance at the weekly dinners. While other long time attendees opted not to be interviewed, several of the “original” group members mirror the sentiments that Bradley discusses. Bradley was simply asked to give his opinion of where he stands in relation to family dinner. The recorded conversation took place in his home. After pouring both of us a glass of wine, Bradley invited me into his living room where we settled in as he shared his thoughts regarding family dinner. The following is the transcription of his statement.

Bradley’s Monologue

Family dinner is a word of mouth meal. I’ve been there when it has been five people; I’ve been there when there has been 90 plus people. Ninety plus people are killer
nights, not fun nights, but that was when we were all a lot closer. Now that some people have kind of jerked it apart and an influx of new people has started attending, things have changed a bit. I think there should be some parameters set for those that do attend, but don’t participate in the true meaning of what it is. I think that is the hardest part for me. People show up and they don’t value the true meaning of where the dinners originated—to form connections so that there is a network of help among strong friendships formed.

The value of family dinner, especially in today’s economic state, is that it allows a group of neighbors to get together and get to know each other in a very hectic world. There’s not a lot of time to cook a dinner every night for everybody, and usually by the time we all get home, we are tired and we don’t want to do anything. Family dinner gives an avenue where we can make something simple and share it with others. We can come enjoy a good meal as we get to see the people we are closer to—our friends, which in a hectic world we don’t get to do as much.

Now, I want to cultivate the friendships with people that I care about in the neighborhood. I can honestly say that after 10 years that I can count on two hands the number of people that I want to continue relationships with. I think trying to establish friendships with so many people has been a hindrance. By moving away from the neighborhood and moving away from family dinner, only 10 people, if that, have contacted me. In that ten, I am counting both sides of the couples so five couples total. Some of the core group has dissolved a bit. I don’t know if family dinner has run its course. I think some of the core group has encountered life, and that has taken them in different directions. We are in a different place and none of us are in the same place that we were five, seven years ago. I think that life has taken its course, and I think that life is bringing us back together—the core group. I really do. I don’t think that family dinner
has been the catalyst for bringing us back together. In fact, I think the dissolving participation has brought us back together.

I don’t think it is time to end family dinner. I like the idea of it, but I think it is time for other people to step up. I think it is a shame that the founding members have had to endure as many nights as they have with no help. I think we can help facilitate new people who want to host, but I think 90% of those who attend don’t want to help keep family dinner going; they just want to attend. I think it is the insincerity of the people who attend that may cause it to end. I also have to admit that family dinner has caused me to be very jaded toward some people.

I think the fact that when Kevin and Mark host, for example, and have different attendees, shows the division that has taken place in the neighborhood. So the challenge is to find people who are more involved in the positive aspects of the neighborhood. But there are many people within the neighborhood who attend on a regular basis that just don’t want to take on the responsibility of hosting. I take offense to that, and I think that you should take offense to that. Maybe you can look beyond that, and maybe you are a better person because you can look beyond that, but I think that a lot of people that attend are rude, inconsiderate, and insensitive people. I think the biggest thing for me is the inconsiderateness of people. I mean to make sure that everyone has enough to eat, and then have to go around and clean up after people because people just left their plates for the host to clean up is inconsiderate. They treat the host house like it is a slop house or a restaurant. They come into a home, that’s not their home, and are rude and inconsiderate. I hold people to a higher standard.

I respect people’s space, and I think that people should respect my space. The thing that gets me is this sense that some of the people that are not there to form
friendships think that they should be waited upon. I always help with the cleanup and I empty people’s trash. I mean, how hard is it to take the fucking trash bag out and ask the host where the trash bags are located? Food is falling on the floor and no one seems to care or even notice; they just keep throwing trash on an already heaping pile as they watch it fall to the floor.

I think now that we have other things to do in the neighborhood, like restaurants and bars, it takes away some of the quality people leaving those that just want a free meal as the majority of people who attend, and they aren’t going to do anything to keep family dinner going. I think the attendance of the core group and more of the people that truly care about family dinner do not attend as regularly as they used to because they do not want to run into certain people. Perhaps if we can get the core group and the new attendees that are active in the neighborhood to be the majority in attendance then we would not have to worry about family dinner. I think that one thing that hurt the whole thing is politics; politics hurt it badly.

I made it through these things that tested the neighborhood, but each event made me want to withdraw more and more from family dinner, but I remained out of obligation—obligation to you, to the core group, to the tradition itself.

Now that I have moved, it was a reason to withdraw. I think that I was more aware what family dinner meant to me when I put my house up for sale. It wasn’t the family type of friendship that I once thought of it as because I was nobody. Nobody talked to me, no body called me. Only two hosts and two other couples have contacted me. It wasn’t that people were trying to give me my space. I reached out, and they didn’t even bother to return a phone call.
I thought a lot of the people who attended were my friends, but to never hear from them after I stopped attending family dinner, or after I put my house up for sale really showed me that they were not my friends. I think there is the family dinner night group and then there are just attendees. The attendees are not my friends—they are just people I know. I think family dinner was the catalyst for the family type of relationships, but that is not the case with family dinner now. If you call Sarah or Jack or many others, they would be there in a heartbeat, but if you call someone who just attends family dinner to eat, they aren’t going to help you.

The fun, the enjoyment of it, has been sucked out of it by a subset of people. They have sucked the life out of it. They have, just like certain people have done to the neighborhood, just like certain people have done to organizations, sucked the life out of it. They are done with it and move on to the next thing to destroy. I may still come to family dinner if I didn’t have to see certain people and have to hear about neighborhood bullshit. Be happy with your life; don’t complain. I don’t want to hear it. I want to hear about what’s good in your life. I want to hear about your grandkids, or you just had a baby. I want to hear about the good stuff. I don’t want to hear about the bullshit anymore.

It used to be that we did not talk about the politics of the neighborhood, but then the neighborhood split changed the topics of family dinner. The whole political politicking got into the dinners despite our guidelines of keeping out politics. People used family dinner for a platform. Family dinner lost its core set of values to me. This was a night for friends to get together and say ‘How are you doing? What’s going on? Are you doing all right? How’s work?’
When we first talked about changing family dinner to just twice a month because of losing a regular host, someone got on the web site for the neighborhood with this how dare you, you can’t do this attitude when they had never even hosted once. That really pissed me off. Don’t tell me we can’t do this when you bring in your store bought shit every week and never take time to fix anything or host. People like that strip the meaning of family dinner; it had meaning. It meant going home and fixing something to nourish your friends and your relationships.

I think that we should not end family dinner. I do think, however, that if somebody can’t host, we should not scramble every Wednesday trying to find someone. If it doesn’t happen, there will be no family dinner that night. The reason I got involved in family dinner is because of Steve. He sought me out as a new person in the neighborhood and cultivated a friendship. Family dinner night was about cultivating and sustaining friendships. People attending now are not cultivating friendships, which I believe to be the main reason for having the dinners; there are still some that attend to cultivate friendships and that is why I don’t think that family dinner has run its course. However, there are some that just attend for a free meal. They are not there to cultivate friendships and strengthen the neighborhood. They are they there to eat, bitch, and leave.

Originally, we formed friendships that were like family. We did things for each other and knew that if there was something that I could do for you I would and vice-versa, but that’s not happening now. We did have a very tight knit community for a long time and we were fortunate, but that closeness is not as strong. Some of the people who attend are attending out of respect for the concept of the event. I would still attend if I lived there out of respect to you. It was the happiest day of my life when I stopped attending. The closeness that was formed is still there. We are like a family that grew up
together and now we are moving and going on to other things. You still have a responsibility to each other. However, now other people come to our family events, but they are not part of our family.

It’s like when you have family reunions. The original group that made a point of attending and bringing their family is older now. They are trying to get the younger family members (in the case of family dinner—the newer attendees) to take on the responsibility, but the tradition or ritual begins to die down because the core group is no longer keeping the tradition or ritual alive. My decision stems from my desire to get back to my friendships; I want to focus on building those friendships again. I spent too much of my time on bullshit within the neighborhood. I was fortunate that I didn’t lose any of my friends, but I did not spend time with them as much as I should. Family dinner was originally about seeing your friends. There are still those that go to see friends, but there are more people attending that are not friends.

It’s going to be someone tied into the core group that will pick up family dinner, I think Ginger and Sam will be great hosts but it will not be the same. And there are so many people that can step-up to be hosts, but they won’t. There are many people that attend that are more capable than anyone currently hosting to take on the responsibility. You told me once that I couldn’t quit family dinner, but now I realize that I had to quit hosting to get rid of those people that suck the life out of you; they are drainers. There are like a dozen people that if just the twelve of us got together every Wednesday that would be fine with me.

I will say this. I don’t miss attending family dinner. I miss seeing you and a few other people. Granted, I am busy focusing on my business. I miss seeing the few core friends, but I don’t miss family dinner. I think that family dinner is now a loosely used
term. There are not the same types of friendships formed. I think to only have contact with so few people from such a large group is sad. I never wanted family dinner to be something that didn’t cultivate relationships. I know that I am the negative Nelly of the bunch. I just think that too many people use family dinner for a free meal.

I learned that in any social situation, people come, take what they need, and then disappear. There are groups of people that have good values, and out of the kindness of their heart they want to keep doing good and that’s what they keep doing. That’s what you keep doing; you want to see the greater good. But unfortunately, the other 90% are not there for your greater good; they are there for their greater good. The beginning of this was dynamic, it was wonderful, but it will never be what it was.

As I reflect on Bradley’s comments, I am hit with a sense of agreement with some of the more negative statements made regarding family dinner. I have to consider if I have turned a blind eye to some of the frustrations of the hosts due to my strong attachment to the weekly dinners.

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The prompt for Susan was the same request to discuss family dinner in general and to speak to her view of where she stands now in relation to the dinners. Susan is one of the people who stopped attending family dinner night due to the political division that Bradley spoke of in his monologue. She has attended family dinner since her departure from the event on the rare occasions that Kevin and Mark host. She is not, however, ready and does not want to begin attending on a regular basis again. Susan agrees to take part in my study, but she wants to meet in a more neutral location. We decide to meet for lunch at a restaurant in Ybor.
Susan’s Monologue

Food is a reason to get together. It usually means a celebration of some kind. If you want people to get together the chances of it happening are pretty slim. You mention that food will be there and people will attend on a fairly regular basis. Food provides a topic of discussion. Everyone has to eat so why not eat with someone you know, or want to get to know.

Food is synonymous with family reunions and Sunday dinners; reunions and Sunday dinners both involve gathering around food, eating, and visiting with others just like family dinner. In hindsight, I think to have the same event every week with the same people can get a bit boring. Now that we go back to family dinner every quarter or so, it’s like an excuse to get together and see people that we don’t see on a regular basis any more. Sometimes that’s a good thing and sometimes that is not such a good thing. I guess it all depends on who is in attendance.

I think there is a core set of people who will always attend or make it a point to try to always attend. I think getting new blood into the event is probably a good thing. It will transition a little bit as this happens, but I don’t see a huge transition at this point. I think the dinner concept is a great idea. By us pulling away, we have gotten to experience a whole new set of the neighborhood people that we would never have had an opportunity to interact with as part of this family dinner group. Part of the reason for that is the perceived and actual secret schedule of family dinner.\(^8\)

\(^8\) The schedule was on a website at the time described, which did require membership to access certain parts of the site. However, the schedule of family dinner was viewable by anyone who went to the site. Also, there was never any formality regarding the invitation to dinner; it was more of a word-of-mouth type of an event.
In light of Facebook, which didn’t exist when this whole thing started, having a Facebook page that is accessible to the entire neighborhood, and not a website that is only accessible by invitation probably would have helped in the beginning. Would that help now? It might help for the people who are new and moving into the neighborhood, but for some of those relationships that were tainted by that first drink of the water. You just can’t get that back.

I think that when it got so large and such a popular concept that someone should have helped people to branch off and form a new set of family dinners. I think that like everything else things ebb and flow; you have your ups and your downs. I don’t know. Perhaps when it was as high as 80 plus people you should have started charging $2/person to help cover the cost. I mean hosts would sometimes see that there was not enough dinner to feed everyone and run to the cupboard and pull something else out. I think that as a group that the issue should have been discussed and say OK we need to figure out a way around this. You could have sponsorships for people that couldn’t afford to pay the extra money. You have someone like us that would say that we will kick in a few extra dollars because so and so can’t afford it. That’s what being a family is about; you help each other out. That could have been thought of. I mean, looking back, hindsight is 20/20.

There is a lot of muddy water that has to be cleared. There were a lot of personal attacks that took place. There is a lot of hurt out there, and some forgiveness that needs to be given. There’s some anger that needs to be let go, and I don’t think that is ready to happen yet. Not just on one side, but all sides. There is some reaching out that needs to occur by some guilty parties that will probably never happen. For me personally, having a letter sent to the city with my name on it, being called out, and then to have a chastised
letter sent out to everybody in the neighborhood was hurtful. If somebody would have come to us and asked, ‘What are you trying to accomplish by doing this? Who do you plan on including?’ Things would have gone a whole lot better, but that didn’t happen. There were assumptions that were made and some of it may have been true, but a lot of it was not. There’s a lot of hearsay out there that needs to be cleared up. It really is a perception. Perception is reality after all. I mean no matter the reality of the situation, it all depends upon how people perceive things. That perception becomes their truth despite the actual “reality” of the situation.

The other comment that I hear from both male and female neighbors is that they feel uncomfortable with the clientele that is at the dinner. It’s not that big of a deal for me really. It’s called discrimination, and some people are never going to change their views or opinions of others. Whether it’s because of your skin or your lifestyle, there is discrimination.

Overall I think that family dinner is a great way to catch up with people in the neighborhood, ask questions, and express your views. You know, to get perspective of your neighbors as to what’s going on in not just the neighborhood, but also the state, the country, the world—everything that’s out there that has to do with all we have to deal. The level of help that one expects from close friends has deteriorated.

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Having heard from two people that have, for the most part removed themselves from either the neighborhood and family dinner or just family dinner, the next monologue is from an attendee that has stopped attending family dinner due to a move out of state. This perspective will be from Franklin who did not become involved in the political drama of the neighborhood and who participated in family dinner before the political
unrest began to have an affect on the attendance at family dinner. I was already planning a trip to see Franklin, so I waited to interview him in person. The setting for our conversation actually took place in a rental car. Franklin and I have a mutual friend that lives about three hours away from Franklin. In order to make the best use of our time, we decided to record the conversation on our drive to visit Ellen.

Franklin’s Monologue

Your friends are your family. My family did not eat at the same time. Everyone came in and kind of did their thing. I never had that sit down meal, so I liked that aspect of family dinner because we all ate at the same time and had a kind of a gathering. Guess it would be more than just a friendship for me. It was more personable because you were bringing your own food and eating at someone’s house as opposed to eating at a restaurant. I also felt like family dinner gave you the opportunity to know everybody a whole lot more. The people that we knew from attending Family Dinner had more like a family relationship, but when new folks came in they were more like a friend than a family member.

At first the concept of family dinner was a little weird. I had never been exposed to that concept where you met with neighbors or friends coming together to eat on a regular and scheduled basis and walking into someone’s home that was completely open. So at first it was a little strange, but after a couple of times it became the norm. Now I think that it is so cool to go to a friend’s house and experience something new like I never had that dish before or hear about something going on that I didn’t know. It was the coolest thing. I always looked forward to family dinner and catching up with friends.
We even volunteered to fill in as a host a couple of times. It was a fun experience. As a host you don’t want to be running around looking like a hot mess because that is going to cause tension. You don’t want to feel like you are going crazy.

We had one of the smallest houses, but we had a big yard so that worked out. It was something I enjoyed. When asked about the minimum number of attendees, I was told forty. I never cooked for forty people, but it was fun. I never did not want to host again. I’m glad I did it and would do it again.

It was hard going every week due to our schedule, but I don’t think that once a week was too much. You don’t see your close friends every weekend and family dinner provided an opportunity to see your friends and continue those close relationships that may have gotten lost in a hectic schedule where sometimes friends get pushed further down the list of priorities. Family dinner was that time that you could be guaranteed to see someone in your social circle. Even if you see someone that you are not necessarily happy to see, you are going to see someone you have not seen in a while so I think the weekly schedule worked, but not always with our schedule.

Now that we have moved away, I regret not making the effort to go more than we did when family dinner was available. You know, being more social and make more friendships and make them tighter. So I do personally regret not going as much as I could have and not meeting more people.

While there was some networking, I found that it was more about the food. People would ask me what I brought and how did I make it, and I would ask what they brought so there was a lot of cooking techniques exchanged. I’m a big foodie so there was stuff that I wouldn’t get from recipes from Google that I got from people in person—tips that you wouldn’t get from a recipe that you might find on line.
I think the dinners were the foundation for my feelings about the community. If it wasn’t for the dinners and that social...you know. The key word is family—family dinner. If it weren’t for that connection I wouldn’t have the feelings for Seminole Heights that I have today. It would have been just any other neighborhood. Because of the bonding and sharing of food, and the sharing of people’s company, that definitely has a big influence. Seminole Heights is definitely the strongest community that I have ever lived in. Even when talking to other family or friends they are completely amazed and they say, “Oh that’s a great idea. We should start a potluck thing.” Some people thought we were exaggerating. They may not have said anything, but they would have that look on their face like “you do not do this every week.” Even to this day, we tell people about the dinners we had in Tampa and everybody is fascinated by it. They think it is something that happened back in the old days. Potluck is kind of an older word nowadays or associated with the workplace if you have a little gathering at work and everyone brings something. That’s why it’s amazing to them to hear...it’s still amazing to me that family dinner is still happening.

When we moved away, I definitely tried to replace that social aspect of family dinner. I didn’t try to replace the dinner actually. It was more that I made an effort to meet out with friends and enjoy their company, but not necessarily that Wednesday...but I longed for that a lot. It was nice having that break on Wednesdays. You know, Monday and Tuesday sucks and you have this dinner in the middle of the week and then you have two more days. Yeah! We would invite a few friends over to get the feeling of being closer with our friends. You’re not at a restaurant; you’re not at a club. You’re in our home. There’s something personable about that that you just can’t get at a restaurant. You’re home. There’s just something special about that that you cannot replace.
Most of our friends don’t...I don’t know if they don’t like to entertain, or they just don’t. Austin is a different social scene. You know they want to meet on the weekend at a restaurant for dinner and then do a club. It’s that whole scene. As opposed to during the week, where they are like, “Oh no, I’ve got things to do.” Which we don’t mind, we are busy during the week as well, but it would be nice to kind of get that again. It’s interesting though. We have more young friends in Austin than we did in Seminole Heights. I think that is a factor as well. Most of our friends in Austin are single and they want to hit the clubs. Where most of our friends in Seminole Heights were couples and they didn’t really care to go out so much. They didn’t care about going to clubs; they were more content doing things in their own homes. But it isn’t just the different age of our friends. We are in different cities, a different environment, and an entirely different regional culture. We had to adjust to this new culture, not that we mind it; we like it, but we miss the dinners.

The older friends we have in Austin like Justin and AJ are more into that idea of doing more social things at home than our younger friends. The actual structure of the neighborhood doesn’t lend itself to entertaining like Seminole Heights, which has a lot of circular patterns to the flow of their living space that made it easier to entertain and big yards. Here, most of our friends live in apartments or condos and they are small units that make it difficult to entertain.

The people in Seminole Heights live relatively close to each other and I think that made attendance easier. Now most of our friends are mostly spread out through Austin. The convenience factor is gone. We don’t all live in the same area and share a love of older homes and talk about those kind of connections. We definitely miss that aspect of family dinner. To this day, we talk about starting our own dinner and here we are two
years later and we still haven’t. While we miss family dinner, I don’t think that they would be able to succeed in Austin, at least not in our neighborhood.

I think the lack of hangouts in Seminole Heights was a big factor in the success of family dinner. In Austin, we have so many cool options to go and hang out and meet people. I think the different culture of Seminole Heights made the home the perfect place to meet. Plus homes are more affordable in Tampa so you can get a bigger home for entertaining. In Austin, everybody in the city center has smaller square footage so it’s not the easiest thing to have dinner or entertain at home.

I would be sad if family dinner ever ended even though I’m not in Tampa because it is such an awesome way to meet friends in the neighborhood. How else would I have met you? How would I have met so many people if not for going to family dinner? How else would I have formed that bond? There’s no other way. Going to a bar? What bars were there at the time? None. You have to get young people involved. Get everybody involved. I mean I started going to these dinners when I was 25. I didn’t really have older friends, you know. I had young friends. That’s when I started meeting older couples, you know in their 30’s, 40’s, and 50’s. I never had social interactions with those age groups except with my aunts and uncles or professors in college, but not as friends. Family dinner definitely opened me up to a different demographic with a mixed group of friends that I never had. I am absolutely grateful for that. I’m glad that I don’t just have people my age as friends. To me, that’s boring. Because of the dinners, I’ve met so many different people from so many different backgrounds and stories. They have influenced me and I hope that I have influenced them with my background and things. I would definitely be sad to see family dinner end. With the strong friendships that we have formed, it would be so hard to see that end. I mean you are like one of our best
friends. If it weren’t for family dinner, we wouldn’t have that. Even though we are no longer in Tampa, it needs to continue.

While I think that family dinner should continue, I will say that with you as a host for 13 years that I can see where you would get burned out. I think people take advantage. I mean why would you come all the time and never host? That was the one thing I noticed. You would see some of the same people always attend, but never host. I was like, come on. Just be a friend and host for at least one time. It would be great, though, to pass the torch to someone else in the community and let them take on the tradition. I’m sure there will be some people against it, but it would open the door to some new folks taking the lead.

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Franklin ends his monologue with an excellent entry into the topic of continuing the tradition of family dinner and who should take that responsibility. Ginger is the last monologue given. Ginger has been coming to family dinner for about five years, and she has begun to take a more active role in the ritual of family dinner including hosting on occasion. Ginger and her partner Sam have volunteered to take over the vacancy left by Bradley’s move out of the neighborhood. They are waiting, however, for some home repairs to be completed before they begin hosting on a regular basis; they do not want an injury to take place due to the construction going on around their home. Ginger invited me to her home to record our conversation. Despite Ginger’s claims that “everything was a wreck” in her house, I would have never known that construction was going on just beyond the kitchen door. After some personal chitchat, we sat in the living room and began recording her thoughts. Her prompt was to discuss the value of family dinner and
the responsibility of newer neighborhood members to keep the ritual of family dinner going for another dozen years.

**Ginger’s Monologue**

Steve was my realtor when I first started looking to buy a house. He brought me to family dinner as a way of introduction into the Seminole Heights neighborhood, and I was hooked. I knew this was the neighborhood for me. I was moving to Tampa from out of state leaving behind everything that was familiar. I didn’t have that many friends in Tampa, but I met so many people that first family dinner. It wasn’t just polite conversation; I really made connections with some of the people. Most of the people that I connected with are more active in the neighborhood. The commitment I see to each other made me want to participate more. That’s why I have volunteered to take over now that Bradley has stopped hosting.

How could I not step up to help out when family dinner gave me a venue to make such great close personal friends? I have been through a rather rough time since moving here, and everyone has been nothing but supportive. Granted things are not perfect, but when are they ever perfect? There is drama and pettiness, but, for the most part, the neighborhood is relatively accepting of what is going on in each of our lives. I feel that I am mostly free from judgment from the rest of those that live in the neighborhood.

Family dinner was one of the main reasons why I chose Seminole Heights. The family type atmosphere surrounding the food and conversation is something that I had never experienced, and I think that it is a pretty rare phenomenon for most people. I don’t know too many neighborhoods that have a thirteen-year tradition of meeting every single week for dinner. I think that’s pretty awesome. I mean, you hear of
neighborhoods having monthly gatherings a good bit, and they are mostly on the weekend. Weekends would be harder for me to get together. Everyone is so busy these days. I think having the dinners on a Wednesday is a perfect choice. It is something to look forward to midweek. You can get together and see your friends, and grow closer relationships with those that you don’t know as well.

I think that family dinner is unique. Without family dinner perhaps some of the neighborhood division that I have been told about could have been avoided, but I think that there is so much more that has stemmed from the dinners than the pettiness that has caused some people to stop attending. I mean, I go to book club, and I know that the people who go to book club formed their friendships through family dinner. And there are other activities that have stemmed from family dinner. What a wonderful continually giving occurrence in which to participate.

I have some fears about the continuation of family dinner though. I mean, Bradley hasn’t hosted in a few months and no one else even tried to step up to take on the task of being a host. I talked with my partner, and we are going to take over Bradley’s night to host. There are so many people that attend family dinner. I don’t understand why finding a host is so difficult when there is a consistent crowd that obviously enjoys attending. I think more people need to take the pressure off those that have been hosting for so long.

I think the responsibility of hosting should start falling on those who are newer to the neighborhood—like me. I recall a little over a year or two ago that there was a vacancy for a host and no one volunteered. A new schedule went out for family dinner that was just twice a month. Even though two weeks were missed during that time, people still got together on Wednesday and went to a restaurant for dinner. Technically,
there were no missed days, but when this happened someone got on the neighborhood web site and wrote something to the effect of “How dare you stop family dinner night; you can’t do that.” The person that made the statement attends family dinner, but does not, nor has she ever hosted. Why couldn’t this person host if the event was that important to her? There seems to be a lot of people who like the idea of family dinner, and there are a good number who speak about the positive affects of family dinner, but few people are willing to host.

At the time that the first host vacancy happened, I could not host. Actually, it will be hard now, but as I mentioned earlier, I feel like I owe it to the community to host. Family dinner has meant so much to me, and it helped with my transition from Montana to Florida. I felt like I had an instant circle of friends that I could hang out with and depend upon if I needed something. That is a wonderful feeling when you move to a new place.

I hope family dinner continues for another twelve plus years, but I have noticed that the attendance has been dropping over the past year. I think it still has a regular crowd of 20-30 people, which I actually like more. I can visit with everyone that I want to see and not have to pick and choose the people that I am going to talk to that Wednesday. When there is a larger crowd, it is hard to spend any quality time with every person that you want to talk with. I think that 20 people would be great, and if we can maintain those smaller numbers perhaps there would not be as much hesitancy to host a few times.

I just know that more people need to volunteer as hosts if we are going to keep family dinner going. This has been such a staple of the community, and has been responsible for so many other groups getting together, like the book club, the garden
club, the bicycle club, poker night, that I just can’t imagine not having family dinner every Wednesday. There have been such close friendships formed over the meals shared. There are so many people in this community that depend upon each other. That is what sold me on this neighborhood—the sense of community that I found here. If we didn’t have family dinner, how would the next person from out of town manage to make such close friends as quickly as I did? How would the next person experience the sense of community that I have found?

**Reflections on the Monologues**

Among these four monologues, there are two very different views given. The first two had me questioning the need for the continuation of family dinner despite both participants stating that overall family dinner was a “good thing.” However, the last two participants renewed some of my passion for having started family dinner in the first place. What was the difference between these participants and why are there two distinct views of family dinner given?

As I contemplate the differences, I realize that Bradley and Susan were caught in the middle of the political drama that occurred in the neighborhood (see page 97). According to Sias (2006), the tensions of a conflict challenge relationships. If the tensions are not properly handled, they can destroy the friendship. The political drama of Seminole Heights became a mismanaged debacle. Sides were chosen and seemingly strong friendships were ended. I think there could still be some unresolved resentment due to the fallout of the political drama.

Neither Franklin nor Ginger was caught in the political drama of the neighborhood. Franklin moved away before the conflict and Ginger moved in afterward.
For both, their view of family dinner was a positive experience and neither felt that the dinners had run their course. Even though Franklin no longer lives in Florida, he felt that the dinners should be continued. If I should ever decide to remove myself from the rotation of host homes, however, he supported that decision.

Another topic of interest that stayed with me long after our conversation was Susan’s comments that people felt excluded from the dinners. For me, and for others that have taken part in the weekly dinners, we had wanted to create an inviting and welcoming atmosphere when the dinners began. As I have stated, attendees are from many political, religious, cultural, and economic walks of life. Sharing food was the common denominator that allowed us to get to know one another on a more personal level. When the dinners began to grow to such large numbers, there were still intimate conversations, but they were separated from other intimate or not so intimate conversations. There was a loss of community, but at the same time there was still a strengthening of community and friendship bonds among the smaller groups in attendance.

Even at the dinners there was inclusion and exclusion taking place. This became more apparent when, during the observations, I would hear people say that they did not know that many people any more. Butchart (2010) wrote about the “exceptional community.” He stated, “…for there to be community there must be some kind of boundary…that limits…what is inside and outside…hence included or excluded by the boundary” (p. 21). What I have realized is that the smaller groups were necessary to continue the bonds of friendship and the nourishing of community.

The dinners cannot be all-inclusive and create community. At the beginning of my research, I considered inclusive communities to be “good” and exclusive
communities to be “bad.” The flaw in my reasoning became apparent as I researched more into the rhetoric of inclusivity and exclusivity. What I found was that communities are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. For a sense of community to be created, there has to be both.
Savoring The Meal

“Cordials,” an after dinner drink, is a metaphor for my epilogue where reflection and savoring the meal of sustained friendships/relationships, social capital, and community take place. As we contemplate, let’s consider how the scholarship ties the observations and interviews given with the research questions:

1) How does food communicate a sense of community, of belonging, of connection, of place?

2) How do interactions with and within place(s) form strong friendship bonds, build social capital, and strengthen community?

Food, as a communicative tool, reveals the sense of community that has been discussed throughout this dissertation. Several of the participants of this study stated how they felt welcomed to the community by their participation in family dinner. Members of family dinner, as a group, gave some participants a feeling of belonging, and Seminole Heights is a place to which connections through interactions, for some, have strengthened bonds of friendship, social capital, and community. However, there were also outcomes that could not have been anticipated. Steier (1995) stated that “our research activities involve an ‘emotioning’…[that] allows us to become engaged with certain stories, or surprised by others” (p. 75). In other words, the surprises came because of the emotional investment I made to these stories.
Though not everyone who participated had a strong connection to family dinner, even they tended to see benefits for maintaining the ritual. Other participants felt that “getting to know” neighbors was an important aspect of our weekly gathering, but that it was not necessary to build relationships that went beyond the scope of family dinner. Even in the observations this was noticeable, and the topic of attending just to eat was, for example, emphasized in Bradley’s interview and monologue. Others discussed this lack of connection, but were not as bothered by the fact that not everyone who came to family dinner was looking to build connections.

Places of Connection

Before the neighborhood of Seminole Heights successfully fought to have a Starbucks as their neighborhood coffeehouse, neighborhood “hangouts” were a rare find. How can a neighborhood become a community without third places? A lack of place did not prevent the Seminole Heights neighborhood from forming what I have referred to as “residential third places,” which expand on traditional notions of third places as community-gathering locations where the members of the community meet, have conversations, and learn about one another in a relaxed environment (Oldenburg, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2006).

The dinner table at the host homes acted as the center for social gatherings as it displayed the food that was shared. Food is an effective communicator. Food tells a story about how much time was put into the dish, the culture of the person who brought the dish, how that person perceives the food tastes of the group, or simply the foods enjoyed by the person who brings the dish. As attendees take part in the weekly neighborhood dinners, they see how the food that enters the hosting homes acts as a
catalyst for more in-depth conversations even when those conversations are not about the food itself.

The use of private residences as a sub-type of third places may be a bit unconventional in that this expands Oldenburg’s (2000) definitive statement that excludes homes based upon their purpose as opposed to their use. Nonetheless, family dinner provides a place to meet informally, relax over food and drink, and build community where only houses and neighborhoods had previously existed. Until third places, as they were originally conceived, are available within communities, I contend that the concept articulated by Oldenburg (2000) applies to family dinner during the designated social gathering times, which is an important aspect to the unity of this neighborhood.

The host home becomes, for the duration of family dinner, a meeting place. There is a transformation of the space suspending the general rules of residences. Transformation of space and place has been discussed with regards to tourism (Ashworth & Dietvorst, 1995; Ratz, Smith, & Michalko, 2008), and the same concept can be applied to the hosts’ homes. Shaw & Williams (2004) emphasized the human component of spaces, which makes places, in my opinion, dependent upon the interaction that takes place to mark the identification of place. This transformation of space negates the customary rules of visiting homes, which include, among others: calling instead of dropping in unannounced; knocking and waiting for the door to be answered, vs. just walking in; needing to be invited over to share a meal, vs. helping oneself. This transformation and suspension of the rules is what allows for Oldenburg’s (2000) description of third places to become applicable to residential properties. In the case of family dinner, the host home’s door is “always open” during the specified hours;
everyone is welcome to enter without knocking or ringing a doorbell. Everyone is considered welcomed to the communal meal.

Perhaps the reason that Seminole Heights’ residents were able to successfully establish family dinner as a regular social gathering was due to the fact that there were no viable options for neighbors to gather in third places. A third place is created by the hosts of the weekly dinners as a place where people are free to be themselves, and share the warmth and companionship of friends. This particular aspect of family dinner, as it has evolved over the course of thirteen years, functions to support the extension of third places into residences because the weekly dinners constitute a “shared event” and do not require the homeowner to continually look after his/her guests. In fact, some people have become so familiar with the settings of family dinner that they can respectfully maneuver the homeowner’s space without the homeowner feeling obligated to entertain. This has been the case in my own home after just the first three or four times hosting.

What does it mean to be present at third places? Presence at third places indicates a desire to connect, to navigate conversations with others who are present. Attendance is a building block of close friendships and active participation. The continual use of space and place increases social interactions of community members (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) and provides a unity that begins to work in conjunction with shared goals. Presence at “third places” represents a desire to know neighbors and nourish community; it is a part of the process to enrich individual lives as well as the lives of other community members. Third places are where ideas are born—ideas that improve the community—and it’s where people network within the community (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Several of the family dinner attendees, hosts, and event founders, have attested that the purpose of eating is but a small part of the “storying” of the weekly dinners.
From my observations, people came to family dinner to socialize. Based on interviews, several participants stated that family dinner was a time to take a break from their usual routine, and to reenergize for the rest of the week by virtue of a change of scenery, a pleasant conversation, or by just sitting back and watching others (doing their own ethnographic observations whether they realize that is what they are doing or not).

The potential for closer bonds, as stated during the interview process, is nourished through interactions in the social aspect of gathering with friends and neighbors. While some people attend family dinner purely for physical sustenance, other attendees receive different forms of nourishment through connecting with old friends or making new ones as the communal meal begins in an atmosphere that is mostly free from judgment from others. In other words, attendees of family dinner can be themselves; there is an acceptance and respect given to each other and each other’s choices. The comfort of the attendees speaks to the relaxing atmosphere that each host house creates. This level of comfort is representative of Oldenburg’s (2000) idea of third places as relaxed and comfortable living (lived in) spaces.

**Connecting Through Interaction**

Most people think of sustenance as the primary function of food. However, equal to sustenance, if not more important, are the benefits of relational nourishment—*soul food*. While both types of nourishment, for physical health and for relationships, have an obligatory component, family dinner is nourishment of a particular kind. Some attend as a break from having to prepare an entire meal, while others meet as a way to rejuvenate through shared conversations to help them get through the rest of the week. Still others
partake in the weekly dinners and as a way to stay connected. No matter the reason, attendance satisfies a basic desire for interactions with others.

Neighborhood involvement itself is fostered by common purpose and a commitment to desired outcomes. In other words, nourishing the desire to be a part of something bigger—having a purpose—is imperative in moving people to act on common goals discovered through the sharing of a meal. When others are vested in achieving the same results, the goal is often easier to meet due to the shared desire.

The development of third places has been, seemingly, a parallel occurrence to the growth of family dinner. The demand for City Council to approve the plans for the neighborhood Starbucks was driven by veteran attendees of family dinner to have more meeting places in the neighborhood. Community support, through participation in new third place openings, led to successful ventures creating more third places. Ella’s, The Independent, The Refinery, are all popular third places with others due to open. This growth represents the parallel growth of family dinner as the need for community interaction is seen as a primary necessity to foster community development.

**Nourishing Bonds**

Research on the quality of urban life has shifted from focus on completely economic development (While, et al., 2004) to cities as livable spaces (van Kamp, et al., 2003). As such, the concern about urban development requires a focus on community development. While it is understandable for young families to search out homes in good school districts, it is equally important, according to this research project, that there is a social network that builds community. Dekker (2007) added that social networks are conducive for neighborhood interactions to occur. Friendship becomes, through
reciprocity as a relational action, more than a surface knowledge of one another. As I reflect upon the autoethnographic, the ethnographic, and the experience of storying of what passes as family, community, and friendship, these are the foundations of the effects that food creates in the discussion about activities within place and space. For example, someone’s third place can be someone else’s workplace, or, in the case of family dinner, a place can serve a dual role of one’s home (1st place) and someone else’s third place. The point is that third places need not be static based on the intended purpose as a third place, but rather they should be dynamic allowing for shifting in and out of their status as third and alternatively non-third places as needed.

The distinction of third place is not so much in the categorization or purpose of the building, but rather in the function or use for which the space serves. The function of places and spaces can often be determined in the periphery. In other words, food is what typically gets the focus of our attention during a meal, but perhaps the relational interactions that get relegated to the periphery of our focus is what should be getting our attention. This dissertation, through the story of community, asks the reader to pay attention to the periphery where bonding and social capital take place and consider how we frame concepts of family and strong bonds of friendship. Bonding becomes an expression of restraint (to keep the distance between yourself and others when you are angry at them), relaxation (to be yourself), pain (when feeling excluded), freedom (from judgment), reflexivity (when you look back at past events and realize even more so their importance), and vulnerability (opening yourself up to the possibilities that come from forging deep bonds with others). Relationships become more about caring for others, than caring about your self. Perhaps, the importance of family dinner is taking place at the periphery, and deserves more attention.
Participants in this study share that family dinner provides companionship, a sense of belonging, purpose, and nourishment of relationships. As evidenced in a number of participant comments, these bonds form a group of people who are inherently less judgmental toward each other than would be the case if the communal activity of sharing food had never existed. Wednesday was not chosen by accident; the mid-week hump can be difficult to get over at times. By going to a place that is non-judgmental, the mid-week grind is eased at a time when the workweek is often at its most pressured. Family dinner provides a reprieve, a "safe zone". We need this; it matters in that many of my participants are from marginalized (LGBT community) and non-traditional (single parents, married with no plans to have children) groups. This is one of the functions of the dinner that certainly constitutes a peripheral, yet deeply consequential aspect/concern. It attends to the marginalized and mirrors the relationships taking place in the periphery of the dinners.

At times, almost everyone reports “not feeling up to it” on a Wednesday evening. Be it stress involved with work, or due to another of life’s issues, you’re just not feeling particularly social. Once you get there, you find that you are nourished by the interaction. There are several factors that are important for a “good life.” Third place settings are important factors of this good quality of life. The interactions that are fed have become the primary way to nourish communal relationships. Through community participation residents find that they are positively affected and have more satisfaction with their neighborhood (Kearney, 2006).

Family dinner is an active co-construction of family for some, and of close bonds of friendship for others. By shifting our focus from the food to the community-food effect, we see nourishment of a different kind, taking place in the periphery. The end
results of attending family dinner, over time, are these different kinds of relational accomplishments. The periphery is where sensemaking takes place with regard to the shared stories, the nourishment of social capital, and the feeding of community. When, for example, the trash was taken from between the back of the garage and the fence, when sod laying parties are generated, when rides to the airport are given, and when pets are cared for as neighbors travel on business trips or holidays, this represents the tangible benefits of what is happening in the periphery from sharing food.

**Creating Social Capital and Feeding Community**

While the nourishment of social capital and the feeding of community spirit are still the key components for many, especially the veteran attendees of family dinner, there is evidence that not everyone considers strengthening relational bonds as a reason for attending family dinner. In Bradley’s monologue, he discussed how some people never understood or do not participate in the purpose, as he sees it, for which family dinner was started—to nourish the familial bonds and community participation. Instead, these few attendees, according to Bradley, attend for sustenance of the body. Bradley discussed how this has diminished his desire to attend family dinner now that he no longer lives within the geographical boundaries of Seminole Heights.

I agree with Bradley that there are, now, different reasons that some people attend family dinner. I also agree that it can be difficult to accept those reasons when many that have attended have formed strong familial bonds in the past. However, I have learned through this research study that not everyone has the need to nourish familial relationships or seek anything more than to fulfill their physical appetite. Is it wrong for people to just attend to get a meal? How do we discern why people attend? In a way,
isn’t everyone in attendance at family dinner sustaining connections? And who is more damaging to what some consider the spirit of family dinner—the person who comes just for food or the person who sees the tangible and intangible nourishment of family dinner, but refuses to share that experience with those who seemingly value only the sustenance food provides?

In the interviews, several participants mentioned hopes of extending family dinner to other parts of the neighborhood, and the core group involved with family dinner had wished other sections of the neighborhood would try to emulate the success of the weekly gatherings. Knowing that it would be difficult to replicate family dinner, the thought was that a different or even more unique event would be created for those who felt that they were perhaps on the fringes of neighborhood events. We hoped that other people would see the need to expand the ritual of family dinner and try to mimic what had been created in terms of connections in other sections of the neighborhood. I know of at least one attempt, but it was, unfortunately, not successful.

Reflexivity

The main body of this research project was derived from conversations held with those who have participated in the research and with the observations made. These conversations have helped me to understand the varying perspectives on family dinner through participation. Steier (1991) suggested that the researcher becomes “…‘that’ self precisely through participation with others, and allows research to become understood as a conversation (or, rather, several)” (p. 6). Additionally, Steier (1995) pointed out that “…reflexivity has its origins in referring not to a thing put to a pattern—in particularly, a pattern that is embedded in a relationship” (p. 63). As I reflect on my participation in
conversations and relationships to which Steier refers, I have come to realize that some experiences of family dinner are not completely how I originally perceived them to be. I have gradually come to realize that there are multiple meanings given to family dinner and not all of these are as positive as others. For example, when Susan shared on page 149:

When you have to be invited or at least feel that you have to be invited or be included on a web site in which it is required (or perceived to be) that you live in a certain geographical location, people are most definitely excluded or feel excluded from family dinner...I think it is too late for some people to ignore their perception of being excluded. The first drink of water is tainted and you can’t get that back.

I see how much I thought I knew already about family dinner was based upon my own perceptions of the family quality the dinners served for me. When I began this study, I wanted to show how the close personal relations I have formed through my participation with family dinner created familial bonds. However, I do not have familial bonds with everyone who attends, nor does everyone who attends family dinner consider those present to be family.

In actuality, after over thirteen years of participation and interactions with this group, I realize how little I knew about a large number of the participants. The understanding I gained of participants has rekindled my desire to continue the ritual of family dinner in some regards, and, in other regards, created a sense that some do not see the need to receive the benefits of family dinner beyond mere sustenance. However, working through this knowledge has enabled me to connect on an even deeper level with those who see and continue to desire the benefits of sharing a meal with one another,
while, simultaneously, having a desire for others to benefit from the peripheral elements of family dinner and to recognize the rewards of social capital, enhanced bonds, and stronger community.

Even as I contemplate the information that has been gained through this research, I still have a gut reaction to the statements that do not, in some way, mirror my experiences of family dinner. Despite my increased understanding of other views presented, parts of the interviews leave me feeling deflated. Other parts of the interviews, however, have lifted my spirits and brought a sense of accomplishment that only comes from a realization that the ritual of family dinner is worth sharing, and these dinners offer fodder to the greater discourse of bonding, social capital, and community.

This dissertation has also given me an optimistic view of the contribution family dinner offers to the concept of third places. There is still a need to further this discourse and add to the ways we view/define third places. Milligan (1998) presented an interaction-based theory stating that interaction fosters attachment to place. As she stated, “Place attachment is significantly based on the meaningfulness of the interaction itself (which then imbues a site with meaning), not on the inherent meaningfulness of the place in which it occurs” (p. 28). In other words, brick and mortar of a third place does not define it as such, rather it is the interaction that takes place within that physical structure. Additionally, Lofland (1998) wrote that we should look at the “qualities of the place” that foster interaction due to its use. Milligan and Lofland’s views can be applied to the role of interaction in determining the labeling of “third places” to the host homes of family dinner during the hours of the event itself. It is the interactions taking place during family dinner that constitute its designation as a third place.
The Dangers of Familiarity

My committee warned me of the potential dangers of my research project to the friendships that have been nourished through a shared meal. I, however, never once thought that the danger would come from my own realization that perhaps the dinners do not have the same meaning for some attendees, and perhaps it is time to let newer attendees of family dinner feed aspects of the community that they deem in need of nourishment, whatever those aspects might be; they are not for me to determine. Despite the changes that will inevitably occur over time and with the addition and loss of members, I will always view family dinner as sustenance that nourished and still nourishes my soul—it connected me to my family of choice and grounded me.

Through reflexivity, Steier (1995) has correctly noted, I believe, “…we have seen how many new issues and questions are raised, particularly about our own interpersonal engagement to the research process” (p. 82). As it relates to this dissertation, there is a question of “authenticity” of the interviews conducted. Jorgenson (1991) pointed out that an “interpretive framework brought to bear in the interview situation is the respondent’s preconceptions about…the research situation” (p. 216). Did the participants of this research study: participants that considered me a part of their family; part of their circle of friends; or just a person they knew from the weekly dinners, speak openly with me regarding their views of family dinner? Considering the information obtained, I do not believe that they were simply stating what they thought I wanted to hear. Also as Jorgenson (1991) revealed in her work, I had to be aware of my own judgments about what was presented. My view of these presentations was based upon my own presuppositions and past experiences (p. 223).
There is still the issue of those that, for any number of reasons, feel that they have been excluded. While it is certainly possible to be exclusive in one’s attempt to be inclusive, one weekly dinner event cannot house an entire residential area. My point, as previously stated, is that both inclusivity and exclusivity have to simultaneously be present to create community. Despite claims of feeling excluded, most notably by Susan, I cannot accept that responsibility of providing a welcoming environment for an entire neighborhood. I hope anyone who feels excluded finds something similar or something completely different that gives him/her a sense of belonging and makes a more positive impact. I realize that I did have an open door policy to my home for eighteen months in order to begin this ritual; if anyone felt excluded, so be it. While it was not a focus of my dissertation, there were mentions of the problems faced when the dinners did grow too large. There was a lack of intimacy, which only could be created by being exclusive even within family dinner. I mean, there were smaller groups that would gravitate to one another even when the attendance was at its peak. People in attendance were already being included and excluded in these smaller groups.

That’s the irony. Some people, as I have discovered through this study, have felt excluded because there has to be exclusion; you cannot have community without some type of exclusion. Also brought out in this study though, were the creations of other neighborhood activities, ideas of which were formed during conversations that took place at family dinner. The Book Club, the Garden Club, the Bicycle Club, Poker Night, and Game Night were all products of conversations shared around the dinner table. These groups have their own inclusivity/exclusivity making their continuation possible.
Self-Reflexive Moments

Myerhoff & Ruby (1982) spoke to the reflexive nature of self. The ritual of family dinner allows for reflexive moments in an individual’s life according to Myerhoff. Additionally, Ruby plays with the notions of “real” and “pretend,” where there is an actual and an “upside-down” reflection (pp. 30-31). I have never had the connection to place that I have among the friendships that have been formed through participation in family dinner, but I think that this has caused me to view family dinner through “rose colored glasses.” I was only seeing the pretend ideal world created by me with regards to family dinner. Before moving to Seminole Heights, I was very much a drifter, gypsy, truly a jack of all trades and master of none. The reality of this research, helped me to see that I have become a community member to all, a friend to most, and a partner to Steve. Likely, none of which would have previously been possible without the various forms of nourishment I received from these weekly gatherings. I have learned that place matters. Previously in my life, I would often become enamored with a place for a season, but then I would soon disconnect and drift on to the next place. Then the process would start over again, I would meet people, join organizations, and be active, but I was never connected.

When I first met my partner of thirteen years, I was still on a self-destructive path of friendships and relationships. I often just walked away, rarely with an explanation, and started looking for the next locale. I may have well taken that route again, but I made a connection with my partner, and to the community, through the dinners, and, as a result, found acceptance to be who I am without fear. Today, there is no question that the dinners allowed me to finally feel accepted.
Before the connections made through the sharing of a simple meal, I lived a double life that was a product of my fear of being rejected. This fear was instilled in me as a young teen when I watched helplessly as my father forced my older brother out of the house for being gay (see Purnell, in press). That fear of rejection and abandonment has lived with me all my life until I forged the bonds of friendship by sharing a meal with neighbors that I barely knew at the time. Family dinner, for me, was more than a way to nourish friendships and create community. Family dinner was my salvation. Although the weekly dinners may not be considered the salvation of others, it was a bell sounding a call to build community. Shared meals and welcoming spirits nourished that call.

Serving More Than Dinner

“Dinner is served!” The call resonates throughout the living and dining room of each host home, as a crowd gathers around the kitchen. Plates quickly fill with food and, one by one, attendees find a place to sit and enjoy their meal. The menu is sometimes heavy on dessert or appetizers and other times there is an abundance of entrees, but there is never a shortage of community at family dinner. In many ways, this verbal invitation to eat – that “dinner is served” – is representative of that community, as well as the warm and welcoming atmosphere that defines this weekly tradition of breaking bread together.

The meal is the first step of connecting. It is through these connections that we can look back and see the importance of the bonds, social capital, and community that have been nourished through the conversations at family dinner. As Babcock (1980) discussed in her definitions of reflexivity, these conversations can be extended into future extensions of the concepts discussed in this dissertation by “the turning-back of
experience of the individual upon himself” (p. 2), through “doubling or self-critique” (p. 4), or “self critique (p. 6).

Planning Future Meals

Extending these conversations into future research endeavors would be to continue and to extend the discussion/description of third places, concentrating on the use of space as opposed to descriptions of place. Family dinner is not the only example of the third place quality of residential spaces. A comparison of Oldenburg’s (2000) concept of third places to the salons originating in the 16th Century would be, for example, an interesting research avenue as a precursor to third places. These salons, much like family dinner, were the only viable means to meet and exchange ideas and knowledge with others. Also similar to family dinner, these salons were free from judgments, but, in the case of the salons, the judgments were regarding the cultural restrictions of the time from outside the homes in which they met. These same restrictions forced them to find spaces outside of the traditional meeting venues of the time.

Additionally, while the focus of this dissertation was not on the use of the term family, family was a definite aspect of this study. It was not that I set out to discover a sense of family, but rather my family of choice emerged from the interactions/participation in family dinner. My future research will include the organic nature of familial relations, a subject of past studies, but still an interesting area of research especially when those relationships are established around the dinner table. This idea can be expanded to how familial relations and use of space as third places works in
certain communities such as religious communities or ethnically concentrated communities.

Furthermore, marginalized communities specifically relate to this study and could be expanded upon to focus on the single aspect of how these specific ideas of third spaces and families of choice are a necessity for marginalized communities. In particular given the large representation of the gay community and non-traditional families found in Seminole Heights, looking at the creation of a microcosm in which members feel protected from harsh judgments might be an interesting avenue to pursue. I do not consider that enough data about this emerged from this study, but the data are there and will be further explored in my future work. Additionally, the study of gendered practices at family dinner compared to social constructed norms and gender “rules,” would help to extend our understanding of the role that interaction plays in developing norms within communities and organizations.

**Summation**

The observations, interviews, and literature support the claim that food is a communicator and feeder of community through the strong bonds that can be sustained through shared meals and the social capital that is nourished through these communal interactions. They all work together to strengthen community. Many, according to the research shown, see family dinner as the catalyst for the strong bonds of friendship, and the strengthening of a diverse population of neighbors into a more nourished and bonded community.

This dissertation is not the final word on strengthening community through food; it is merely a point of dialogue—part of an ongoing process. It is my hope that after
reading this dissertation, you will be inspired to go out and not only seek community, in whatever forms that community may be found, but also look to nourish and sustain community as well. As you savor the meal presented, I ask that you remember these words, this extension of third place, and how food acts not only as a communicator, but how food is also a tool to sustain friendships, nourish social capital, and feed community.
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Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study IRB Study #

ID: Pro00006540

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss the consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called: Creating Community

The person who is in charge of this research study is Dave Purnell. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the people in charge. He is being guided in this research by Fred Steier, PhD.

The research will be done at private residences of Seminole Heights in Tampa, FL, and rented residences in Provincetown, MA, and Orcas, WA.
Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to

Look at the history of neighborhood gatherings, how they helped form friendships networks, and how these ties then promote community involvement.

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to

1) For the Seminole Heights participants, you will be asked to participate in a group interview discussing the history and purpose of the community involvement and how it has promoted friendship networks, as well as written stories about experiences in neighborhood gatherings. The other locations will be asked to be observed during neighborhood gatherings.

2) The duration of the project will be between seven and twelve months with at least three visits to each areas neighborhood gatherings.

3) The research will begin one week after IRB approval is received and continue for one year.

4) The research will be conducted in the private residences of the participants.

5) There will be a digital audio recording of the group interview.

6) If you are participants of the interviewing process, you will be informed of when the taping is taking place and given the option of agreeing to the recording of the interview. At any time, you have the option to choose not to participate in this research study.

Total Number of Participants

A total number of 120 individuals will participate in the study at all sites combined.

Alternatives

You can opt not to participate in the study

Benefits

I am unsure if you will receive any benefits aside from reaffirmation of how social gatherings create a stronger community.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

I will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Your Rights

You can refuse to sign this form. If you do not sign this form, you will not be able to participate in this research study.
How Do I Withdraw Permission to Use My Information?

You can revoke this form at any time by sending a letter clearly stating that you wish to withdraw your authorization. If you revoke your permission:

1. You will no longer be a participant in this research study.
2. I will stop collecting information about you.
3. I will use the information collected prior to the revocation of your authorization. This information may already have been used or shared with others, or I may need it to complete and protect the validity of the research.

To revoke this form, please write to:
Principal Investigator: Creating Community For IRB Study # Pro00006540
4202 East Fowler Avenue  Tampa, FL  33620-7800
Privacy and Confidentiality

I will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, and all other research staff.

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that your rights and your safety are being protected.

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).

- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation. USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

I may publish what I learn from this study. If I do, I will not let anyone know your name. I will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. If you choose to withdrawal, we maintain the use of the data collected prior to your withdrawal.

You can get answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call David Purnell at (813) 494-1373.
If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.
Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true. 

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study                     Date

_________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands:

• What the study is about.
• What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used.
• What the potential benefits might be.
• What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud his or her judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained, and therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent                     Date

_________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
Questions for Personal Interview (Appendix 2)

1. Do you recall your first family dinner night?

2. Why do you continue to attend?

3. How would you characterize the friendships that you have formed through the dinners? Can you compare those to friendships that you have with others in the neighborhood that do not attend family dinner?

4. Has your attendance at family dinner had an effect on your neighborhood participation? Can you give an example?

5. Do you consider yourself to have a responsibility in keeping family dinner a part of the neighborhood? If so, what is that responsibility?

6. Do you think that the dinners have fulfilled their usefulness? If not, why? If so, why?

7. How would you characterize neighborhood social gatherings?

8. How do these gatherings fit into your understanding of community?

9. How would you characterize community politics? Have they had an effect on the attendance/participation of neighborhood gatherings?

10. Do you consider family dinner night to be a significant factor in building your community? Why or why not?
Questions for Group Interview (Appendix 3)

1. How does food act as an identifier? In other words, how does food represent something about the person bringing it?

2. Does sharing food with others form a group identity?

3. How has neighborhood conflict played out from each of your perspectives? Has it strengthened or weakened friendships?

4. How has family dinner developed networks of friendships, if at all?

5. As attendees of family dinner, how do you define your role (gatekeepers) in welcoming newcomers to the neighborhood and/or dinners?

6. What does community mean to you?

7. What does family dinner mean to you?

8. What benefits do you perceive as resulting from attendance at family dinner?
Observation Participation Guide (Appendix 4)

For observations, I sent out an email to the usual attendees to let them know that I was observing the dinner that night so that individuals could opt out of attending if they so chose. I also make announcements at family dinner that I was conducting observations. If anyone wished to be excluded and stay at the dinner, I was mindful of their wishes when I was in or near their presence. There were always enough participants that this was not a problem.
Study Participant Guide (Appendix 5)

In order to increase the data collected, I have expanded my observations and my number of interviewees to fulfill a higher level of saturation. By broadening my criteria for participation, I was able to gain data from outside the core group who maintain family dinner, which gave more data relating to the meaning that participants give the weekly dinner event including views from new attendees, past attendees that have stopped participating in family dinner, past attendees that have moved away, those who have experienced conflict with some of the more active residents, as well as attendees who bring their children to the event. For participating in the research, I required that participants be active participants who attend at least 75% of the dinners each month or had attended that often on the past. The participants do not all live within the geographical borders of Seminole Heights and Hampton Terrace neighborhoods, and some have moved out of state.