

## Of the Community Conceptual Framework

To be **of the community** is to have a personal, interactive knowledge and experience of the community such that one is recognizable as a community member (Mahdi, 2018). The construct stands in contrast to the Membership element of the classic Sense of Community framework (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which emphasizes boundaries and other attributes that require power and privilege to maintain. *Being* of the community—as opposed to *having* membership—is especially relevant for community collaboration initiatives, in which issues of power and marginalization must be considered.

This framework was conceptualized based on research with the Go-Go music-cultural community, known for its localization to the Washington, D.C. region. Results of the 2017 study indicate that the marginalization of the community in its local sociopolitical, historical, racial, and entertainment industry contexts affects the applicability of the classic sense of community framework, specifically the membership construct. ‘Of the Community’ is also offered as a better fit than ‘membership’ because of the Go-Go community’s unbounded structure, in contrast to the bounded structure of the communities that exemplify McMillan and Chavis’ attributes of membership.

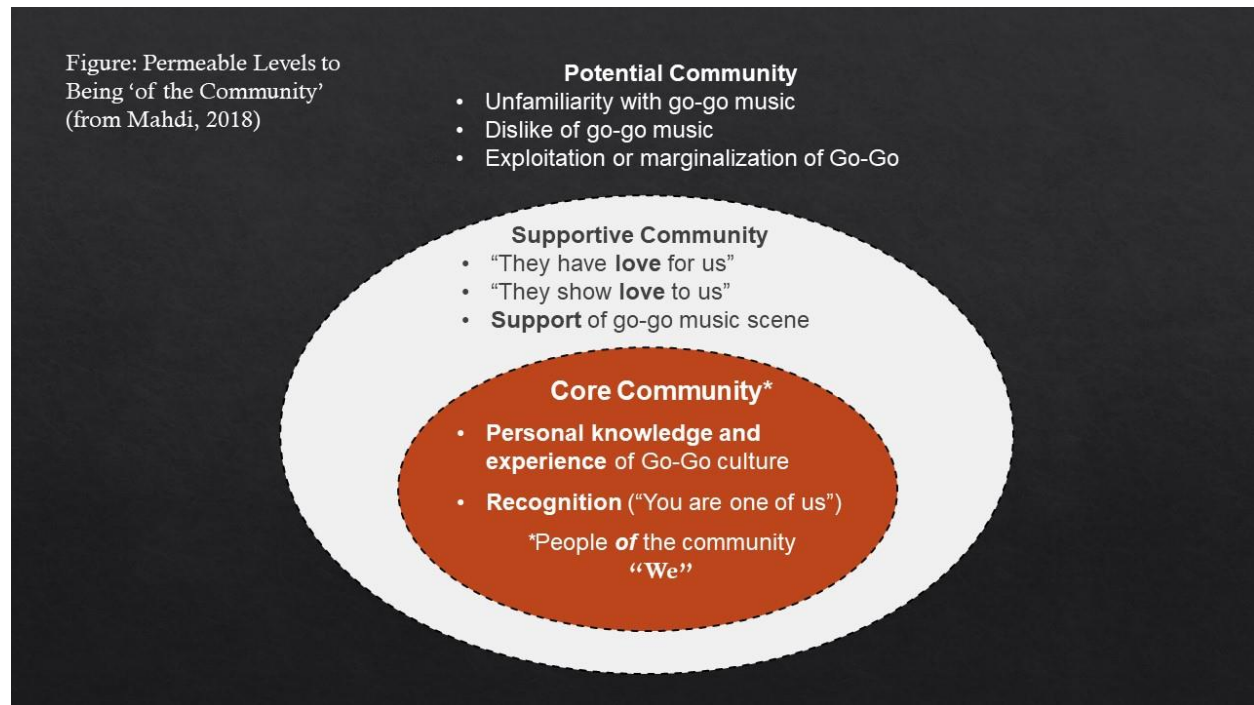
The framework includes four attributes with interdependent definitions: *permeable levels*, *personal knowledge and experience*, *common symbol system*, and *recognition*.

**Permeable levels** means that instead of a closed community having boundaries to define who belongs and who does not, a community can have varying degrees of participation and recognition. The ‘Of the Community’ model has three levels of community representing: 1) who is **of the community** (*core*); 2) who is part of the imagined community collective (*supportive*); and 3) who is unaware of, indifferent to, exploitative of, or explicitly in opposition to the community (*potential*). The Figure below uses dotted lines to represent the possibility of an individual’s movement between levels.

**Personal knowledge and experience** determines the extent to which one is able to communicate using the community’s common symbol system. Community members can identify one another through conversation or other forms of expression in which they demonstrate knowledge of community history and culture that could only have been gained through substantial participation in the community.

A **common symbol system** allows members to identify one another and to amass community history and culture. It is learned through life experience and/or extensive social interaction within the community.

**Recognition** means that one is recognized as a community member by other members. It captures the collective sentiment of the community toward an individual, as in, “You are one of us.” An individual may feel, “I am known to be of this community.”



**'Of the community'** is a concept that reinforces respect for the culture of the core community. As such, an individual at the supportive level can demonstrate love and support for the community—without the need to earn a place in the community and claim it as one's own, as stipulated in sense of community's Membership element. Instead, the community claims individuals who are recognizable as members.

In the referenced study, **love, support, and knowledge** emerged as important themes in how individuals find themselves and others in relation to the community, but *belonging* did not. Belonging (needing something from the community) is not the priority in terms of one's relationship to the community. Instead, support (to the community, for the sake of the community) is the priority.

This framework speaks to culturally-based communities and to marginalized communities who may be the focus of collaboration by researchers, organizations, and/or institutions. It also speaks to researchers, organizations, and institutions as they learn to consider issues of power and cultural marginalization when they engage communities.

#### References:

Mahdi, T. C. (2018). *Membership vs. being of the community: A qualitative study of the Go-Go music-cultural community* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://tahiramahdi.com/a-qualitative-study-of-the-go-go-music-cultural-community/>

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology, 14*(1), 6-23.