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From Gentrification to Regeneration: A Grounded Theory Study of Community Leadership in Southwest Atlanta

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Abstract

Urban neighborhoods have undergone property disinvestment, a decreasing population, and a general economic decline. Atlanta, the fourth-fastest gentrifying city in the United States exemplifies this trend. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand how discourse about gentrification helps a community address its goal of regeneration. We used Habermas' critical hermeneutic lens to investigate the perceptions of 20 resident leaders and stakeholders in a community that was undergoing the process of gentrification. Our findings illustrate that this community is fraught with systematically distorted communication that used communicative action for emancipation. The four theoretical codes: gentrification (a collision between politics and economics), systematically distorted communication, regeneration, and strategies (communicative action as emancipatory), were used to represent how power and language intersected within economic and political discourse. Through an identification of elements of communicative action for neighborhoods that are undergoing gentrification, this study provides guidance for development of stakeholder community action plans.

Keywords

Gentrification, Urban Redevelopment, Regeneration, Grounded Theory, Habermas, Communicative Action

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Urban neighborhoods have undergone property disinvestment, a decreasing population, and a general economic decline. Atlanta, the fourth-fastest gentrifying city in the United States exemplifies this trend. The purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand how discourse about gentrification helps a community address its goal of regeneration. We used Habermas' critical hermeneutic lens to investigate the perceptions of 20 resident leaders and stakeholders in a community that was undergoing the process of gentrification. Our findings illustrate that this community is fraught with systematically distorted communication that used communicative action for emancipation. The four theoretical codes: gentrification (a collision between politics and economics), systematically distorted communication, regeneration, and strategies (communicative action as emancipatory), were used to represent how power and language intersected within economic and political discourse. Through an identification of elements of communicative action for neighborhoods that are undergoing gentrification, this study provides guidance for development of stakeholder community action plans. Keywords: Gentrification, Urban Redevelopment, Regeneration, Grounded Theory, Habermas, Communicative Action

Introduction

Urban neighborhoods in this US and across the world have undergone property disinvestment, a decreasing population, and general economic decline (Brown-Saracino, 2016; Epstein, 2018; Fenton et al., 2013; Lukic, 2011). Atlanta, the fourth-fastest gentrifying city in the United States (Brummet & Reed, 2019), is comprised of neighborhoods close to the city center and seat of urban wealth, exemplifies a similar profile; it suffers from high poverty rates, unemployment, and low literacy rates. According to the Annie Casey Foundation (2019), Atlanta surpasses the state and nation in terms of the number of children who live in high-poverty areas.

Historically, neighborhoods in south Atlanta, founded as predominantly African American communities with steady employment, were segregated conditions characterized by many Black-owned homes (Annie Casey Foundation, 2019) (In this study, African American and Black are used interchangeably.) During the 1960s, integration caused the decline of Black-owned businesses and the reduction of financial services to minorities (also called redlining), causing the flight of residents to suburbs (Keating, 1999). Due to gentrification, this urban area has had “a progressively fragmented periphery . . . with competing conceptions of the causes of urban poverty, who or what was to blame for its presence, and how community

empowerment could proceed” (Ahearn, 2000, p. 358), resulting in neighborhoods that are fraught with social conflict.

Due to competing value systems, gentrification has challenged many urban revitalization efforts as communities experience increased displacement and decreased employment, (Epstein, 2018; Meltzer & Ghorbani, 2017). Although divisions between groups of stakeholders on neighborhood challenges leads to public conflict that necessitates effective community discourse (Crankshaw et al., 2019; Webler & Tuler, 2000), dissension among community leaders often fuels discord and disrupts efforts toward policy interventions that might other benefit the community.

Habermas (1985), concerned with disruptive dialogue within communities, used the term *communicative action*, to depict the issues of truth, rightness, and authenticity that are likely to arise during community empowerment initiatives (Ahearn, 2000). Habermas defines communicative action as the interaction of social actors in the public sphere, or the public discourse that focuses on the goal of achieving shared understanding and building consensus. Although literature on the effects of neighborhood gentrification is abundant, there is a dearth of research related to community dialogue and action.

The purpose of this study was to understand the process of a reconstruction initiative within this neighborhood by examining the interactions among resident leaders, politicians, and other stakeholders. Using Habermas’ lens of communicative action, we focused on how a community’s discourse about gentrification addresses the community’s goal of regeneration. The research question for this study is: “What does Habermas’ (1985) communicative action look like in a community that is undergoing the process of gentrification?” By identifying elements of communicative action for low socioeconomic communities that are undergoing rapid urban redevelopment, the findings of this study can be used to inform administrators’ and stakeholders’ decision making.

Literature Review

Gentrification Concerns

Community change through communicative action involves the issue of environmental gentrification as it relates to social justice and inequity (Anguelovski et al., 2019; Gould & Lewis, 2018). Theoretically, gentrification is essentially the “affirmation of dominant modes of spatial production at the expense of disempowered ones” (Valli, 2015, p. 1192), with gentrifiers and developers’ enacting their ability “to make space” by pushing out economically and socially weaker groups that experience a restriction in the ability to produce space. Gentrification results in residential displacement of poorer residents and other vulnerable populations (Mennis et al., 2013; Steinmetz-Wood et al., 2017). Debates on gentrification concern whether it transforms “a drug-infested no man’s land to the epicenter of downtown cool” (Bleyer, 2005, p. 4).

The debate is informed by the use of the term *regeneration*, used by proponents of gentrification, that, for some, means “state-led gentrification”. Other scholars use the term, *socio-economic revitalization*, whereby its goals are to replace slums with mixed-tenure housing, deconcentrate poverty, reduce territorial stigmatization, and advance the social mix of poor tenants and wealthy homeowners (Kearns & Mason, 2013; Watt & Smets, 2018). Still other scholars do not approve of the term *regeneration* because its very process propagates the underlying problems, residential mobility (e.g., displacement), rising housing costs, cultural conflicts, crime, and economic blight or neighborhood decay (Kearns & Mason, 2013; Rousseau, 2009).

The immediate problem of residential mobility can occur when in-migration displaces current residents. Literature on gentrification explains how recent in-migration of higher-income residents into urban neighborhoods leads to socioeconomic revitalization, by shifting neighborhood characteristics such as average income and home values (Hwang & Sampson, 2014). Although these shifts often foster increased welcome services to the community, these efforts are associated with a concomitant rise in cost of living that encourages residential displacement. While this might present as a perceived long-term socioeconomic change, in some communities, it occurs in just a few years (Fenton et al. 2013). Such shifts cause inequities and become evidenced as socioeconomic and racial issues.

In addition, when new residents in-migrate, typically they are motivated to improve their homes, resulting in socioeconomic change, characterized by “improving the quality of housing units, raising neighborhood home values, and contributing to broader development within neighborhoods” (Branic & Hipp, 2018, p. 79). Consistent with the investment behaviors of in-moving residents, current residents (“stayers”) also engage in renovation activities, although for different reasons (Baum & Hassan, 1999). “Stayers” want to upgrade their home as “movers” upgrade, then sell at a profit. The relationship between the “stayers” and “movers” becomes fraught with racial, economic, and intergenerational conflict (Kreager et al., 2011).

Resident investment activities build momentum, result in increased home values, improved socioeconomic conditions, and the propagation of activities that reduce crime rates (Ellen & O'Regan, 2011; Owens, 2012). Nevertheless, these same improvements also result in residential downward mobility and displacement (evictions), rising housing costs, cultural conflicts, crime, and neighborhood decay. According to Branic and Hipp (2018),

Relatedly, a potential consequence of the in-migration of affluent residents into lower-income neighborhoods is displacement of current residents. As neighborhood socioeconomic conditions improve, those who rent homes within the neighborhood may be priced out as rents increase. In effect, such residents are pushed out of the neighborhood and forced to locate affordable housing elsewhere, endure the economic costs of moving, and potentially suffer the loss of established social ties. (p. 79)

As seen in the above discussion, the political and social conflict between the stayers and movers generates instability and social unrest.

Dialogue and Conflict

As described in the aforementioned, gentrification affects displacement of vulnerable residents (Mennis et al., 2013; Steinmetz-Wood et al., 2017) by creating polarities between legacy and millennial residents, lower versus middle and higher socioeconomic residents, and racially defined groups (Steinmetz-Wood et al., 2017; Valli, 2016). This in turn minimizes efforts for policy changes for neighborhood beneficence. During upheaval, divisions occur and conflicts emerge. To facilitate dialogue for change, constructive community dialogue is needed (Crankshaw et al., 2019; Webler & Tuler, 2000). Dialogic communication allows speakers to hold a position and others to hold theirs without opposition or assimilation (Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Dialogic theory, grounded in Habermas' theories, is considered an approach where planners use dialogue to engage people in conversation about problems and reach consensus (Innes et al., 2015).

The Common Ground Institution (2017) defines dialogue as an interactive process that brings sections of a community together and encourages their leaders to explore the underlying neighborhood issues that are undergoing rapid gentrification. Adding to the conflictual nature

of gentrification, developing conditions for community dialogue is complicated (Zoller, 2000). Ideal dialogue strives for trust-building within communities. However, participants must be motivated to change previous views (Zoller, 2000). In this study, we describe the community dialogue in terms of the Habermasian ideal speech situation (Dance & Johnson, 2019; Heath, 2007) with regard to equity (Webler & Tuler, 2000) as gentrification interferes with ideal free speech (Roy, 2015). Equitable dialogue includes engaging diverse stakeholders, marginalized populations and privileged groups, into the dialogic process between (Ahearn, 2000; Dance & Johnson, 2019). The use of Habermas' theory is controversial. Some researchers think that his approach to dialogue accommodates diverse perspectives (Ahearn, 2000). Others suggest that Habermas' theory does not accommodate divergent positions of the interests of low-income residents related to processes of urban development, (Roy, 2015). Socioeconomic and racial differences can undermine trust among neighbors. Moreover, these differences can weaken a sense of community in gentrifying neighborhoods (Drew, 2011; Gibbons et al., 2019; Steinmetz & Wood, 2017).

A Community in Conflict

Certain areas of Atlanta have undergone gentrification with questionable results for residents (Roy, 2015). Roy's case study showed that the collaborative planning process in the Historic Fourth Ward neighborhood in Atlanta became a means for market-driven state and local policies that reinforced social inequities rather than challenging them. In his study, he incorporated an analysis of interviews and archival documents to understand the community's process of engagement with the development of the Atlanta Beltline, a large financial community investment project. Although these processes endeavored to foster community empowerment, seemingly they co-opted democratic principles of communicative planning in poor urban areas, result in a reinforcement of social class structures and the lack of housing affordability.

Despite stakeholders' concerns regarding gentrification in the community, certain factors affirm the value of the Atlanta Beltline redevelopment for a community—its history and community pride. Historic housing, in particular, can be a powerful determinant of gentrification (Rigolon & Nemeth, 2020). In addition, long-term residents, who inspire community pride, create stability (Brown, 2014). Although the Atlanta Beltline redevelopment continues to be a driver for social and economic change in the community (Immergluck, 2009), it is also a source of conflict-based dialogue.

Other case studies on gentrification in this community indicate that redevelopment has significantly impacted demographics and the affordability of housing (Ahearn, 2000; Immergluck, 2009; Palardy et al., 2018) and led to social fragmentation (Walsh, 2018). Ahearn (2000) conducted a case study of The Atlanta Project (TAP) that examined the religious discourse used to help mobilize a community in conflict. They found that TAP was useful as a test of the explanatory power of Habermas's theory of communicative action as well. He also suggested that lasting empowerment required expert help but cautioned that this help cannot usurp a community's decision-making processes. In 2009, Immergluck (2009) examined how the announcement of the "Beltline," a large development initiative, had on property values in Atlanta, Georgia. He found that there were large increases in housing costs near the lower-income, Southside parts of the Beltline, the same area of our study. Palardy and colleagues (2018) conducted a survey assessing resident perceptions of the Atlanta BeltLine project between neighborhoods differing in racial and socioeconomic composition. Using a social exchange theory lens, the authors found that support for the project between groups had similar factors such as use, perceived economic benefits and perceived psychological empowerment; however, in the majority White neighborhood, residents indicated greater use and higher levels

of empowerment than the less affluent majority African American neighborhood. Although these case studies provide a glimpse into this community, more research needs to be done to understand the needs of these urban residents.

The Study

Background and Context

We began this study with a focus on social justice in terms of employment and in collaboration with a non-profit organization, Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE; 2020). PSE trains residents in marginalized neighborhoods in leadership strategies as a means of empowerment (Walsh, 2018) and recommended the community in south Atlanta for a study on community dialogue. In addition, the first author has a long history with PSE leadership. Based on our first community contact with a resident leader, it became evident that there were multiple sources of conflict within the community, not just issues related to employment. Due to this evidence and that the second author is a communication professor with a long history as a community organizer, we focused on the communication issues that surfaced related to gentrification. The first author is a qualitative methodologist with a background in leadership and education.

The demographics of the neighborhood of study as compared to the State of Georgia illustrate the racial and economic differences. The racial composition for this neighborhood is 89% Black and 5% White, whereas the residents of the State of Georgia are 31% Black and 60% White (Table 1). Compared to the State of Georgia as a whole, this neighborhood has a higher rate of unemployment, 8.6% compared to 3.2% and a much lower median household income, \$24,091 compared to \$56,183. In addition, 79% and 21% of the housing units are rentals and owner-occupied, respectively. These statistics illustrate the inequities of a marginalized population, including those attributable to gentrification.

Table 1

Comparison of Demographics: Neighborhood of Study and State of Georgia

Variable	Neighborhood of Study	State of Georgia
Race		
Black	89.0%	31.0%
White	5.0%	60.0%
Other	6.0%	9.0%
Unemployment Rate	8.6%	3.2%
Median Household Income	\$24,091	\$56,183
Rental occupied	79%	21%

Source: 2019 ESRI Business Analyst Online via Atlanta Regional Commission

Some participants were reluctant to participate in the research process. In our first meeting, one resident activist raised the issue of our funding and relationship with PSE. After

we explained that we were not receiving funds from PSE, he acquiesced. This experience made us cognizant of community residents; inherent lack of trust of researchers and that previous researchers who had requested access never provided any information in return. Further, because as White females from the academic community, we felt it was essential to discuss our perspectives with other research group members to help us to clarify any researcher bias or reflexivity.

Theoretical Framework

Although it has multiple social and economic impacts related to neighborhood change, gentrification has created conflict for stakeholders. These conflicts often emerge in gentrification discourse, which reflects power struggles, and, thus, a theoretical framework that highlights communication inequities within a community is appropriate. Habermas reflectively strives to distinguish how power, labor, and language all intersect within moral and political discourse (Shaw & DeForge, 2014). For Habermas, oppression occurs when the discourse of the established dominant power creates systematically distorted communication (Jahnke, 2012). Such communication involves a “system of reciprocal misunderstandings,” whereby a neutral observer may perceive that participants do not understand one another (Habermas, 1970, p. 206). Habermas’ (1991) critical hermeneutics describes systematically distorted communicative discourse whereby actors cannot freely express themselves. Habermas posits an idealized theory of communicative competence that promotes the ideal that speakers communicate on consensually agreed-upon truths and normative standards when they are allowed to express freely their personal needs for growth (Huspek, 1991). For Habermas (1991), “Speech acts rather than rituals or weapons are the form of social intercourse that counts” (p. 133).

Successful communicative action is seen when one hearer takes up “an affirmative position” toward the claim made by the speaker (Habermas, 1985). When there is communicative failure, however, speaker and hearer can shift reflexive levels, from ordinary speech to “discourse,” which involves processes of argumentation and dialogue in which the claims are tested for their rational justifiability as true or authentic, as when dialogue demonstrates personal attacks. For Habermas, researchers must attend not only to the text but also to “power relations embedded in the structures of a capitalist, classed society” (Shaw & DeForge, 2014, p. 1576). Some researchers argue that Habermas’ theory supports public dialogue with diverse perspectives (Ahearn, 2000), while others suggest that Habermas does not accommodate divergent positions of low-income residents (Roy, 2015).

Gentrification provides a vehicle for studying systematically distorted communicative discourse, whereby members of the community perceive a power differential with resulting inequities. The community that is the focus of this study has a longstanding history of racial discrimination and marginalization (Keating, 1999). Understanding how communicative competence exists in even an embattled neighborhood may highlight strategies for mitigating systematic distorted communication. Using Habermas’ lens of communicative action, the authors explored the process of this neighborhood reconstruction initiative by examining the interactions among resident leaders, politicians, and other stakeholders. We were interested in individual participants’ perceptions of and experiences with of the process of gentrification within their communities.

Rationale, Data Collection, and Analysis

We used Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory as the methodology. Grounded theory, in particular, provides explicit strategies, an inductive approach that involves the

constant comparison of patterns derived from initial, focused, and theoretical codes, for studying processes (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, we focused on participants' meaning-making processes concerning gentrification to regeneration and the distorted communicative discourse inherent in this community. Grounded theory allows for the study of action for discovering how, when, and why people construct action," as well as disjunctures between views, and feelings (K. Charmaz, personal communication, May 15, 2008), making it an appropriate methodology for this study.

Participants

We targeted a community that is undergoing rapid gentrification—a city-designated planning district that included five in-town neighborhoods. This is a difficult group to access due to the well-deserved general mistrust of outsiders by the community. Thus, it was important to partner initially with PSE. Later, however, it became important to distinguish our independent role within the study also due to general community distrust. Participants included 12 resident leaders (including two from the local homeowners association [HOA]), four academics from a local college, two elected officials from the City of Atlanta, a police official, and one stakeholder from a non-profit who is responsible for a large neighborhood commercial development. In total, 16 African Americans, four Whites, 12 females, eight males participated in the three focus groups and six individual interviews (Table 2).

Table 2

Participants

Name	Focus Group or Interview	Race	Gender	Position
Anna	Focus group	AA	F	Resident
Attorney Justice	Focus group	AA	F	Academic
Barbara Braun	Interview	AA	F	Elected Official
Booker	Focus group	AA	M	Resident
Charlie	Focus group	AA	M	Resident
Dr. Dean	Focus group	AA	M	Academic
Esther	Interview	AA	F	Elected Official
Frederick	Focus group	AA	M	Resident
Joe	Focus group	W	M	Resident
Katherine	Interview	W	F	Stakeholder-Nonprofit
Kathleen	Focus group	AA	F	Resident
Kevin	Interview	AA	M	Resident-HOA
Major Xena	Interview	AA	F	Police Official

Maria	Focus group	AA	F	Resident
Patricia	Focus group	AA	F	Resident
Prof. Story	Focus group	AA	F	Academic
Prof. Urban	Focus group	AA	F	Academic
Rose	Focus group	AA	F	Resident
Tommy	Interview	W	M	Resident-HOA
Wilbur	Focus group	W	M	Resident

Note. AA = African American, W = White

Data Collection

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval through Mercer University, we recruited resident-leaders from a database from the PSE, an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization that promotes social justice through community-based action. This database included long-standing resident-leaders in the community as well as residents that had participated in year-long community leadership training through PSE. We recruited participants using purposeful sampling, where we selected information-rich cases based on the purpose of our study (Patton, 2002). Resident participants had to live in the neighborhood. We sent out emails 30 resident-leaders, conducted two focus groups that included 10 long-term resident-leaders (living in the community between two to 25 years) within the five neighborhoods. From the initial sampling of these focus groups, we expanded our data collection as theoretical sampling directed us to find relevant relationships for theoretical elaboration and refinement (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical questions arose from the focus groups that suggested the need for theoretical sampling to expand our perspectives by finding additional participants to refine emerging concepts (Charmaz, 2014). We then expanded our data collection to participants within the local college and other stakeholders from the area for a total of three focus groups and six semi-structured interviews. We conducted two focus groups at local activity centers and one at the local college. We conducted six semi-structured interviews at places convenient to participants. All participants were connected to the community either by living or by working within the neighborhoods.

Focus Groups and Interviews

We used focus groups to understand the complexity of behaviors as collective conversations and dialogue (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). We conducted two focus groups with 12 resident leaders through PSE, which represents marginalized neighborhoods in urban Atlanta. Consistent with the principles of theoretical sampling (Patton, 2002), we invited four academics from the local community college for a third focus group and four community officials to participate in individual interviews. To expand our knowledge of government, education and employment we conducted interviews with various community stakeholders, including neighborhood association leaders, educators in a local college, a member of the Atlanta City Council, a member of the City of Atlanta Police Department, and an Atlanta School Board representative. We queried participants' motivation, problems, goals, and strategies, with a focus on their process of negotiating dialogue.

Table 3*Interview questions*

1. What <u>motivated</u> you to meet with me (us) today?
2. How would you describe change in this neighborhood since you have been here?
3. What problems associated with social or economic issues in this neighborhood are most <u>relevant</u> or important to you?
4. What <u>motivates</u> you to become involved in the process of tackling these issues in this neighborhood?
5. How do you think the 5 neighborhoods can <u>collaborate</u> to address relevant problems in the community?
6. What might <u>hinder</u> the collaboration among the five neighborhoods?
7. Now let's talk about planning for action to address social or economic issues in this community.
8. What <u>existing conditions</u> or factors should be included in a Community Action Plan (CAP) for social or economic issues?
9. What <u>goals and objectives</u> should be included in a Community Action Plan (CAP)?
10. What <u>recommended actions</u> should be included in the Community Action Plan (CAP)?

We conducted and audio-recorded all focus group and interviews sessions, between October 2018 and May 2019 in the City of Atlanta. We maintained participant confidentiality through de-identification. (Table 2).

Data Analysis

We used inductive analysis to identify, analyze, and present patterns within the data, consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). We used Charmaz' inductive approach for line-by-line coding and iterative constant comparison for the analytic grouping of codes. First, we transcribed each interview and then conducted line-by-line coding through which we identified underlying concepts breaking data up into component parts. We conducted memoing after the focus groups and interviews especially when participants discussed conflicts within the neighborhood and times when we needed to evaluate our bias as academics. We made analytic distinctions between the residents and stakeholders narrative to understand each group's point of view. We specifically looked for implicit actions and meanings, especially how participants negotiated communicative discourse. From these segments of data from the initial coding, we found the most significant and frequent codes with focused coding. Participants repeatedly discussed problems and the need for solutions in their neighborhoods while often blaming government policies and officials. Again, as we conducted more data collection with various governmental entities, we focused on the systematically distorted communicative discourse. Then, we conceptually linked codes into focused codes, a term initially developed by Corbin and Strauss (2015). In this process we pulled segments of data into conceptual categories and subcategories highlighting power structures between groups that diminished problem-solving as a consequence of conflict. These links became important in the analysis for this study. Finally, we synthesized these codes into theoretical codes to identify core categories that emerged from the data (Figure 1). The theoretical codes depict the

relationship between residents and other external stakeholders and how their communicative action engenders “Gentrification-Collision,” “Systematically Distorted Communication,” “Regeneration” and “Communicative Action is Emancipatory.” Table 4 depicts how we moved from text to initial to focused and then theoretical codes.

Table 4

Code development examples

Text segment	Initial codes	Focused	Theoretical codes
Because those folks are short timers. By and large, they are renting and their rent is going to go up beyond their ability to pay back. Who doesn't enjoy having their surroundings improved while you were there? The developers are merciless in this area, They just circle the streets, identify homes, buy them for as well as they can and flip them. That is the trend. (...) Those folks won't be able to live there because they won't be able to afford the cost of living in that neighborhood or the cost of groceries, or daycare. Because when a class comes in that can afford more, its going to cost more.	Housing costs Lack of resources Blight	Developers-investors	Gentrification-Collision
And that a lot of the different cultures that people bring into the community of the class that are here, they don't work with each other, so whatever they grew up being and having to do, they're not the same thing that I grew up and having in the community.	Conflict between residents, Cultural differences, SES	Lack of trust among residents	Systematically distorted communication
You know the prediction is that when we complete the Yard, that 5, 10, 15, to 20 thousand people a day is gonna cross, prepare for that. So when they complete this, people from all over the world is gonna come. So get ready for [change].	Revitalization Economic engine Yards	Regeneration-revitalization	Regeneration
Just sending out a robo-call or putting something in the mailbox is not gonna work, because 9 times out of 10, the mobility rate in this community is so high, they may never get it. I literally asked for volunteer teachers, and the superintendent, and we knocked on doors telling, "I need for you to come to this meeting tonight." We had infographs, because when we talked about the numbers, the numbers wasn't resonating. So I asked the district to create an infograph showing a class of 25 fifth graders and literally coloring in five students that showed out of every 25 fifth graders, only five are coming out reading on grade level. (...) It was painting a picture to show the traditional way of how we've done school turnover would not work in this community.	Leadership-vision Knowledge of the community Goodrun Strategies	Communicative Action	Communicative Action is Emancipatory

Trustworthiness

Verification procedures included prolonged engagement in the field, member checking, and clarification of researcher bias (Glesne, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As far as prolonged engagement, between October 2018 and May 2019 we attended over 30 hours watching interactions within the community at community meetings, conferences, block parties and civic forums to understand the complexities and context within the neighborhood. During these meetings, we heard the residents discuss the conflicts that were apparent in our data and observed the interplay of discourse within the community (Bogdewic, 1992). Because participants did not respond to individual member checking requests, we created an additional focus group in May 2019 not included in analysis that served as member checking for credibility and verification of results (Glesne, 2015). Two residents from the first focus group participated with three new residents who were all from the previous year's neighborhood leadership training. We presented our major findings to this group to ensure accurate and

ethical interpretations. This focus group provided triangulation regarding the problems with constructive dialogue within the community. One participant resonated with the presentation of findings:

I am really a new person to trying to be involved in my community, but (...) I feel like there's so many different organizations, but nobody's talking and nobody's executing. It's just a meeting about a meeting about a meeting and that frustrates us. It's going to frustrate new people like me that come in and they're just going to be like, oh well nothing's getting done. (...) But as it stands right now, people I think just get turned off and there just a lot of hurts still.

This segment from the verification focus group demonstrates the problem of distorted communication within the community.

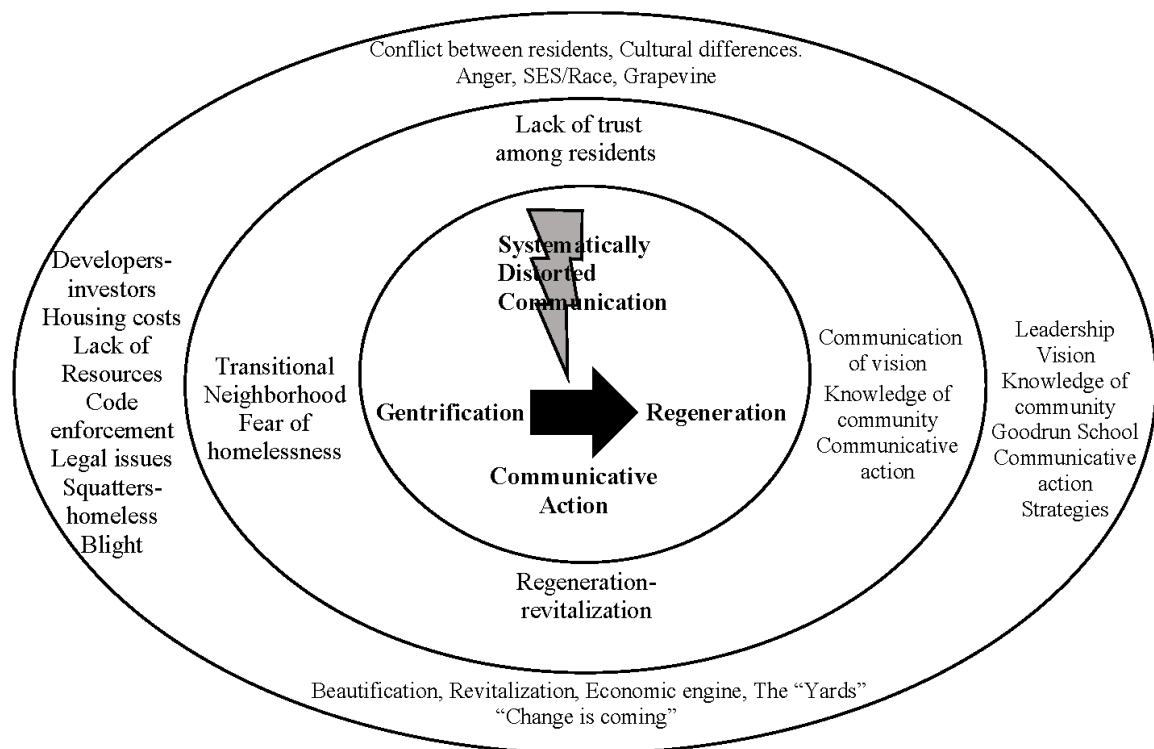
Results

We synthesized 111 initial codes into ten focused codes that were integrated into four theoretical codes: gentrification (a collision between politics and economics), systematically distorted communication, regeneration, and strategies (communicative action as emancipatory) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Coding progression: Gentrification to Regeneration:

Outer circle-initial codes, middle circle-focused codes, inner circle-theoretical codes



The theoretical codes illustrate how systematically distorted communication creates a barrier for gentrification to become regeneration, yet also how communicative action is occurring in the process. As the community moves toward regeneration, systematically distorted communication via distrust of leadership and the different cultures; however, traces of communicative action prevail through local leadership that “knows the community,” illustrated by the creation of Goodrun School, a private school that replaced a failing public school. The following results illustrate each section.

Gentrification—Collision between Politics and Economics

Three focused codes were associated with *Gentrification*: developers-investors, transitional neighborhood, and fear of homelessness. The three interconnect as developers-investors spearheaded increasing housing costs, and code enforcement created legal problems for residents who were already strapped by a lack of resources. Charlie, a neighborhood association resident leader who had been a grassroots activist for over 40 years in downtown Atlanta, addressed this issue:

Developers sometimes flip [houses] over again to make people's property taxes go up higher, so they can try to force people that's in a similar house or put people in a jam to where they gotta go take out a loan in order to pay their taxes. . . . And some of those investors live out of the country, so you can't never find them. But, they consistent, especially when they go through the foreclosure process. When they buy the taxes, you got all the extra fees, extra interest you gotta pay. They find people particularly who gonna lose they house. Even the ones putting up houses; they're the ones getting Code Enforcement behind them.

His vernacular language demonstrates his years of experience in confronting Developers-investors' economic strategies, challenging the city, and acting as an advocate in educating residents, especially those “legacy residents” who are vulnerable to rising housing costs and displacement due to a lack of resources. This collision between politics and economics includes insurance carriers who are “going around telling folks, ‘We not gonna renew your homeowner's insurance until you cut down those trees, until you build a new roof, until you paint that house.’” Attorney Justice, an attorney from the college focus group, echoed Charlie's sentiments. “The developers are merciless in this area; they just circle the streets, identify homes, buy them for as little as they can and flip them.” These problems also affect the residents that rent. Wilbur, a resident since the 1960s, reported, “I'm renting a house where it once sold for \$180,000, my landlord bought it for about \$25,000, and when it gets back to \$180,000, he's gonna sell it again.”

As residents are displaced, gentrification creates a “transitional neighborhood.” These developers-investors also add to the rental housing market, which contributes to blight and neighborhood decay. In this area, residents reported that rentals range from 70% to 80% of the housing market. The rents increase as housing prices rise, leading to evictions and homelessness within the community. Attorney Justice clarified:

Because those folks are short timers, those folks are going to be moved out by and large. Those folks are already gone because they don't own their homes; they are renting and their rent is going to go up beyond their ability to pay.

Charlie also reported that rising rent was not just for low-income residents, as “now those units are going to people with middle income, because they’ve been priced out, too.” Housing prices were rising for renters as well as homeowners.

There are contrasting views about the housing dilemma. Kevin, from the local HOA, which is in conflict with the local neighborhood association, stated, “I’ve had landlords say to me in the past year, we’re glad that you guys [HOA] are here because we haven’t come to Pittsburgh in five plus years to get our rent money because [we] were afraid to come.” This intensifies the hands-off landlord problems, as blighted housing lies vacant and without local ownership, and homeless squatters move in. These problems lead to a lack of population density and reduced tax base, which results in a lack of services, including a lack of grocery stores, which creates a food desert, which is an urban area without access to quality, fresh food. Residents complained that they drive 20 minutes to the nearest grocery store. Frederick, a longtime community leader, stated, “That’s why you have all these mom and pop stores that sell bad food and stuff . . . you can’t find nothing that have the right date on it.” Although housing is the main concern of residents, the lack of a tax base complicates other necessary services, even in downtown Atlanta.

Systematically Distorted Communication

Focused codes for *Systematically distorted communication* included “Lack of trust in leadership” and “Conflict between residents.” This code included the problems with communication in a community under pressure. This historically Black neighborhood had thrived after the Civil War; however, in the 1960s, with desegregation, Black businesses had declined, and property had been usurped by the city of Atlanta for the I75/85 connector and stadiums. Esther, an elected official with the school system, stated, “Lack of trust—you have to respect it, they have a historical perspective, they’ve seen it; these are residents that have been here for decades.”

This “Lack of trust in leadership” echoed throughout the narratives and included descriptions of political corruption and the belief that the City of Atlanta, in conjunction with economic interests, intentionally underserved the community. Prof. Urban, from a local college that serves this community, noted, “The leadership of the city has traditionally underserved these communities. It’s completely intentional and it’s cyclical. . . . Those people are disposable. It is specific. . . it is for the intention of increasing property value.” Residents were fully aware of the pervasive inequity. Charlie, the neighborhood association leader, remarked, “If [only] our city council people would stop trying to cut these back-door deals and really do something real positive for these neighborhoods.”

None of the officials that we interviewed perceived any poor intentions by the city. The councilperson, Barbara Braun, was surprised that residents thought this. Residents repeatedly reported a lack of knowledge of what goes on within the city. During the focus groups, they would ask each other, “Do you know about . . . ?” One example of how residents (even resident leaders) did not know what was going on was a \$30,000 grant available from InvestAtlanta that both resident focus groups mentioned. Several residents reported seeing information posted on Nextdoor, a community website. This “grapevine” was inaccurate, as the research team found out. The councilperson, Barbara Braun, reported that the money “was gone” months ago, but the resident leaders did not know this. Historically, residents had good reason not to trust leadership and had difficulty getting accurate information. In our sample, however, none of the leaders gave indications of deceitful practices; however, this does not mean such practices are not occurring elsewhere by others such as developers.

A lack of trust between residents also was evident. Conflict between the neighborhood associations, especially the newer HOA, was apparent. Kevin, an African American from the

neighborhood HOA, stated that, in one meeting, the council member reprimanded him for raising emotions in a meeting, “instead of getting on the person that called me a White man, an Uncle Tom. It’s crazy.” The dialogue became racial and personal, displaying systematically distorted communication between Black residents.

Also apparent was the discomfort of residents with new residents of differing socioeconomic status, age, and race. Cultural differences created fear among legacy residents, and code enforcement was a real concern for these residents, many with limited income. Charlie explained these cultural differences:

We might have pets or have dogs in our home, but we ain’t, like, walking them 24/7 up and down the neighborhood at night (laughter), and writing down Miss Susan’s address ‘cause she needs a code violation. They call Code Enforcement on her!

Councilperson Barbara Braun had viewed the conflict and the difficulty of consensus between residents firsthand:

I’ve had folks in a room, and it takes an hour and a half to get a consensus on anything. . . . Last meeting was two grown men arguing over issues about race; there was shouting . . . with police officers in the room. They were telling them to stand down. It’s just crazy. And then after the meeting, I had to pull both of them aside and say, “Really, guys?” I can’t believe it. [The City of Atlanta] brought in a facilitator to try and resolve some of the issues with the five neighborhoods for funding for money. I went to five, six, seven meetings, and they brought in the facilitator, and it was the same thing. They refused to come to a solution. It was just crazy. And guess what; he just walked away. He said, “I’m gone, I’m through. I can’t do this.”

Crazy was a term used by some residents for behavior among residents during meetings. Although some of the interviewees had not seen this behavior personally and dismissed that it could happen, others had personally experienced it. The lack of trust in leadership trickled down to the interactions between residents, demonstrating systematically distorted communication.

Regeneration

Despite a lack of trust of leaders and their neighbors, participants were optimistic about their community’s future in terms of *regeneration* rather than gentrification. *Regeneration* was contextualized by codes such as “Beautification,” “Revitalization,” “Economic engine,” and “Hope in the Beltline (Yard),” the large development project attached to the Beltline that will encircle the city center. Frederick expressed his excitement about the Beltline as “people from all over the world are gonna come, get ready for it.”

Participants were acutely aware that “change is coming” and that their neighborhood was not going to be the same. Frederick explained:

It doesn’t have to be gentrification because what you get with gentrification is a group of people who got some expendable income, got some money, who trying to shift the landscape of the neighborhood. And we seem to listen with money. So I buy a house, pay \$200,000. . . . I got a voice in this community.

Frederick, a legacy resident, had been involved in the Civil Rights movement and was a former elected official. Although he distrusted developers and other “gentrifiers,” he also welcomed change. He even welcomed the wealth that comes with it. Tommy from the HOA expressed a similar sentiment:

It’s a slow crank right now. Whatever the crank, it’s going to crank up. Development’s going to take care of this problem. I see it. It’s coming. There it is. It’s not here yet fully. [Development’s] going to take care of this problem, but can we take care of this problem?

Frederick and Tommy, although historically unable to collaborate, both sensed the future of the neighborhood. The neighborhood association, represented by Frederick, distrusted change more than did the HOA. Nevertheless, even Tommy wanted the residents to resolve internal issues rather than allowing external economic forces to control the outcomes.

Strategies: Communicative Action as Emancipatory

The strategies available in the residents’ narratives were insufficient in view of the overwhelming problems. Interviews and focus groups with residents ended with “What’s next?” in regard to actions to take; they were tired of the “problems.” Strategies were seen in the transcripts but were undecipherable to residents during the member-checking focus group, even when we thought that there were presented strategies. The focused codes for this theme included “Leadership-vision,” “Knowing the community,” and “Goodrun school.”

The officials for the city clarified their positions, whereas residents expressed distrust and fear. Major Xena reframed the systematically distorted communication with her Leadership-vision:

Maybe my angle on the blight is more of, is that [of a] homeowner who’s renting to those people that are in there doing the right thing by them. . . . I wouldn’t go to an elderly person’s house and be like, her roof caves in. Start a case on her. What can we do to help her? Because there’s people here that will help. The community can come together and say, “What can we do for Ms. Emma?” That will be my stance.

Explaining her fears about code enforcement, she reinforced her role as policing the developers-investors rather than the residents. She goes to the neighborhood meetings and is a welcoming presence for this community. She “knows the community,” which is evident in the participants’ narratives.

Barbara Braun, the councilperson, had to be strategic in how she worked within this community. She led with her vision while Knowing the community:

There’s a difference in terms of helping a community in ways they think they want to be helped. . . . But sometimes helping them, I tell people, sometimes, I’m going to drag them along. They going to be dragged along hooting and hollering. And when they get to the other side, they’re going to say, “Oh my goodness!”

She learned to ignore the raging rhetoric and lead the people to the solutions that she could see from her vantage point. After conflicts in which residents “took the meeting over,” and even a professional mediator “walked away,” she learned to “quietly try to get them all on

the phone individually and say, “Can you come to a solution? Are we all right with this?” And try to pull them back together.” She knew and loved the community and used adaptive leadership to fulfill her role.

The neighborhood had a yearly leadership training program, whereby residents could meet on Saturdays and learn “organizing at the speed of trust.” Joe, a White resident, learned to negotiate conflict in these terms:

You come across people who, they enjoy it because of the fight, and they go because they want to pontificate in front of people with all these things. I think if you say, “Let’s get together for beers or whatever on this particular night” . . . well, that beer meeting might actually become the real meeting, I think intentional friendship building [is important] and realizing that, that’s crucial.

The community leadership training provided an avenue for collaboration with the diversity of people within the neighborhood. *Communicative action is emancipatory* when communities can communicate on consensually agreed-upon truths and normative standards; however, this is not necessarily formal. Knowing the community was strategic, as outsiders were not trusted, but also strategic was having a leadership vision for the future that dispelled rhetoric.

The final focused code was the implementation of “Goodrun school.” It was evident that education was important, and residents were proud of the new local charter school. The intersection of housing and education was evident; the city official from Atlanta Public Schools had to create an affordable housing policy due to the popularity of this new school so that local students would not lose seats to those coming from outside the neighborhood. Esther, the school official, revealed the gravity of the original problem:

Public School X is 1,254 out of 1,254 schools, the absolute lowest. The poverty in that area is so deep that it was one of the bare bones school budget; the bare bones resources is not going to take this school to another level. . . . If we did not have a plan to turn over our most failing schools, [the state was] going to intervene.

The failing educational system had been a problem for several decades, and the school district wanted change. Despite local academic arguments to the contrary, residents described a school that was working for the neighborhood, although, initially, residents were opposed. Esther reported how city officials received support from a neighborhood with 80% rentals. “We literally knocked on doors; I literally asked for volunteer teachers, and the superintendent, and we knocked on doors.” The officials and teachers brought with them an infographic that showed how only one in five fifth graders were reading at grade level to convince neighbors of the importance of the school. Support for the change was enhanced by the fact that the new school was to be run by someone who “lives in that community, and [the community] knew him; you have one of your own in your community that have built this education incubator institution that is doing great things, that wants to give back to his own community.” This highlights the strategy of *Knowing the community*. Community leaders described how the community was contributing to maintaining affordable housing. Frederick explained:

That sounds like that’s the worst thing you could do, but the truth of it is, there’s 19 families in those apartments whose kids go to Goodrun. . . . So, one asks why you are paying that much money, because it’s really too high. The owners of apartments are taking advantage of us. But, in the long range, it’s good for us

because we're going to keep them 19 families in this area, and they're gonna stay at Goodrun.

The community was committed to having their children and their families to stay in the neighborhood, and, in this regard, the need for affordable housing was paramount.

Discussion

The empirical research for this study of this community consisted of three focus groups and six interviews, with the intent to create an “open communicative space” (Habermas, 1985) among individuals and to facilitate a discussion of the social and economic problems using a consensus-building process (Godin et al., 2007). This study was intended to provide guidance to stakeholders in the development of a community action plan. The four theoretical codes represent how power and language intersect within economic and political discourse. The road from gentrification to *regeneration* for this community is fraught with *systematically distorted communication* that needed *communicative action for emancipation*. Longstanding oppression within historically Black communities in urban Atlanta is the dominant discourse that precludes communicative action in the community (Jahnke, 2012). Because residents did not trust the leadership or each other, there was limited communicative competence, whereby speakers communicated on consensually agreed-upon truths. Normative standards which might allow freely expressed personal needs for growth, as idealized by Habermas (Huspek, 1991) were lacking. Even though groups were cognizant of the conflicts and prevalent problems, they could not reach consensus about strategies to promote regeneration.

Despite the lack of trust, there were traces of emancipatory action. Intersubjective understanding was created by an internal perspective of knowing the community rather than by external forces, such as the failure of the professional facilitator brought in by the City of Atlanta. Each constituent organizes experiences in terms of knowledge-guiding interests. Due to its historical perspective, the community was suspicious of any outsiders or political decisions made by external perspectives. This community rejected the technocracy, the governance by experts, and bureaucracy (Habermas, 1985). Residents often did not have the practical information necessary to be a knowledgeable social actor among other social actors (Habermas, 1985). This made it difficult for residents to reach an understanding in terms of communicative action rather than be subject to the strategic action placed upon them by external forces through individuals such as developers-investors, who are interested in their own economic or political goals for the community.

The question raised by Tommy, the HOA resident, “Can we take care of this problem?” is important for the social coordination of communicative action. From the member-check focus group, we learned that Tommy coordinated with Frederick to solve a community problem, even though they had been involved in interpersonal attacks. Communicative failure results when the speaker and hearer shift from speech to “discourse,” whereby argumentation becomes a dialogue centered on personal attacks. Tommy and Frederick tested their claims for rational justifiability as authentic and were able to supersede the racially charged discourse. Habermas’ (1985) theory of communicative action is centered on the notion that social cooperation depends on the potential of actors to recognize the intersubjective validity of their different claims. Habermas explains:

The communicative model of action does not equate action with communication. Language is a medium of communication which serves understanding whereas actors, in coming to an understanding with one another so as to coordinate their actions, pursue their particular aims. . . . Concepts of

social action are distinguished, however, according to how they specify the coordination among the goal-directed actions of different participants: as the interlacing of egocentric calculations of utility (whereby the degree of conflict and cooperation varies with the given interest positions); as a socially integrating agreement about values and norms instilled through cultural tradition and socialization; as a consensual relation between players and their publics; or as reaching understanding in the sense of a cooperative process of interpretation. (p. 101)

Leaders used the notion of knowing their community to access community members for rational communication as a mechanism to reduce conflict within the community. They sought community guidance to identify for strategies. Although their intentions went unrealized, the quality of interactions with members highlight their engagement and concern.

This study had several limitations. One inherent limitation to focus group and interviews is self-report. A history of distrust and difficult interchanges with previous researchers fostered the community's reluctance to participate in this study. It took several months and researcher participation in local community meetings to gain their trust. Public officials were generally forthcoming in their communication. However, given the historical context, they may have been reluctant to illuminate certain interactions to protect the community. In addition, since participants were unwilling to engage in member checking, we initiated a focus group of resident leaders to discuss the findings and to ensure the credibility of the research. This process step did help clarify certain areas while demonstrating our sensitivity and commitment to ensuring representativeness of the community.

As White upper-middle-class female researchers, we lack an inside-out understanding of lived experiences and difficulties within this community. To challenge our assumptions, we consulted with other academics and with community members during the focus group. The experience of this study challenged our previously held understanding of gentrification, its impact on housing costs and it reinforced a belief about the importance of education during development as a vehicle for promoting for community stability. Although the results may be transferable to similar urban communities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), additional research is warranted.

This study illustrated the effects of gentrification consistent with the literature: decreasing crime, rising housing costs, and increased resident activity. What is unique to our study is the presentation of the process of interaction within the community. Not only did the community leadership lead with vision, using adaptive leadership, they demonstrated communicative action, albeit haphazardly, to coordinate the goal-directed actions of different participants. Change occurred by knowing the community, an internal perspective.

The findings provide guidance for stakeholders who seek to develop community action plans. In particular, the finding point out the importance of using the elements of communicative action within neighborhoods that are undergoing gentrification. Moreover, the finding highlight the essential role of the internal perspective, knowing the community, and how it can facilitate change. Findings from this study illustrate that political and economic entities are advised to engage the community from within, and not from without, for the former serves only to create fear, anger, and distrust. Although there is no ideal communication, cooperative processes of interpretation prevail within the community when developers take time to listen to the knowledge brokers and give credence to the observation that they hold the community's best interest at heart.

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Author Note

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