

A COMMUNICATION APPROACH TO CONFRONTING POVERTY:  
CREATING INTERACTIONAL CAPITAL AND BUILDING CROSS-CLASS COMMUNITY  
THROUGH COLLECTIVE COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES  
IN THE BOULDER COUNTY CIRCLES CAMPAIGN

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Creating Interactional Capital and Building Cross-Class Community through Collective

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A Communication Approach to Confronting Poverty: Creating Interactional  
Capital and Building Cross-Class Community through Collective  
Communicative Practices in the Boulder County Circles Campaign

Dissertation directed by Professor Lawrence R. Frey

Abstract: This qualitative, ethnographic research study documented the use and effects of collective communicative practices (CCPs) employed by an organization, called Circles, that aims to create community among a group of diverse people from different socioeconomic classes, including those who currently live in poverty, for the purpose of aiding the efforts of those who are impoverished to move out of poverty. Using data collected from participant interviews, questionnaires, participant-observation, and Circles documents, the research findings suggest a new conception of the communication being promoted through Circles, called interactional capital, which describes the types of communication and other communicative resources that facilitate the creation and maintenance of social capital through interactions with others. The discussion chapter examines the nature and impact of interactional capital on participants at the individual, collective, and societal levels; and it explicates implications of the study, both theoretically—with respect to relationships among poverty, communication, and community—and practically, with regard to what lessons learned from this analysis suggest might be best practices for antipoverty programs, including Circles.

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Many thanks to my dad, who was willing to listen to, think about, and debate these ideas with me; whose work with people struggling with bankruptcy continues to inspire me to be an advocate for social justice issues; who reminds me all the time that he is proud of me; and who gave me some of my favorite dissertation advice: “Just finish it!”

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## PROLOGUE

During summer 2010, when I was only a few months into this dissertation project, my partner and now fiancée, Jeff, and I had dinner with a group of friends. Collectively, we were a well-educated and successful group, including graduate students, business professionals and entrepreneurs, a musician, a physician, and two soon-to-be lawyers. Many in the group were dedicating their lives to noble, social justice-inspired pursuits: caring for those who are sick, developing policy reform to benefit those who are marginalized and oppressed, teaching young people, and promoting equal access to healthy food for underresourced populations. After the meal, talk turned from social stories to discussions of current events, politics, and, on this particular evening, poverty.

Group members discussed their thoughts about poverty, including Jeff and I, who took turns horrifying the group with the many awful statistics about poverty that we had learned. *Did you know that people living in poverty often pay more for their goods and services (such as food or bank fees) than those that do not, especially if you cannot drive your SUV to Costco, buy in bulk, and store your bulk purchases in all the extra space in your garage and house? Did you know that poverty can be harmful to health, as children who are poor are twice as likely to have asthma (which can be caused by living in a house with cockroaches!) and that children who are poor are five times more likely to be hospitalized for poisoning? Did you know that living in poverty can actually cut years off your life, as much as a 25% difference in life expectancy between people living in the richest and poorest communities?*

Our dinner guests looked appropriately disturbed by these statistics, making murmurs to express their sadness and paying more than necessary attention to their empty plates. The mood then shifted slightly, as people grew more uncomfortable and began posing rebuttals: *But those people don't work! They don't want to work! They just sit around all day, spending their welfare checks and having more babies!*

In response, Jeff and I deftly dropped facts and numbers, invalidated fallacies about “welfare queens,” and talked about what a difficult lifestyle poverty is (certainly not a lifestyle any of the people who are poor who I know would choose to live).

Then came the kicker, as a friend began to tell the following story:

*I've got a friend who works in the social services office. It's a gross job she does, and she deals with these people all the time. There's this one man who freaked out on her because he got caught trying to buy cigarettes with his food stamps—three times!—and they finally took his food stamps away. He came to her office in tears, but it's not like she had any sympathy for his addiction. She deals with people all the time who don't ever want to work; they just want to sit on their couch and watch TV all day, or they're too busy popping out babies and getting paid by the government for each one. Honestly, Angie, I'm giving up my tax dollars to pay for their cigarettes and babies. Isn't that enough?*

At this point, others began to chime in, cataloging problems with human services programs, such as food stamps and Medicare, and throwing around a lot of phrases, like “*those people*,” “*welfare*,” and “*mooching off the system*.”

I felt deeply disturbed by these negative attitudes toward people living in poverty, and, in other ways, equally frustrated by the inability of government programs to fix either poverty or

the U.S. economy. It was so maddening to me that these programs were not helping those who were poor but also that those who were wealthy perceived those program as being free handouts that allowed people in need to, as a dinner guest put it, “*lie on the couch all day and eat Twinkies.*”

I wanted to say something, and I felt strongly that I had to fix these misperceptions! However, I was not sure how to respond or what I could say to change people’s opinions. Actually, I was not even sure what to say, as I was not even sure of what I believed. I stammered out a few words of retort, but the crowd had turned against me. As one person exclaimed:

*You’re telling me I should be giving my tax dollars to people who spend it on cigarettes? That’s ludicrous! They’ve probably got 12 kids at home who aren’t eating well because they’re blowing all their welfare checks—my tax money!—on junk. Oh please, it’s appalling.*

I had been beat, and I did not know exactly why at the moment, so I shut down.

I knew that most of the people living in poverty who I knew from participating in the program described in this dissertation were hardworking and motivated people who faced countless challenges that made their already tough situations even more difficult. I knew that “these people” certainly did not spend their days laying on couches or “eating Twinkies.”

In many cases, I knew that multilayered systemic factors of living in generational poverty posed significant and, in a few cases, nearly insurmountable, hurdles to their success. I thought about how being young and poor made it harder to even survive, and, in many cases, led to physical, emotional, nutritional, and intellectual deficiencies. I envisioned how difficult it must be to concentrate in class without a proper breakfast or lunch, how hard it must be to finish homework without any educational materials (e.g., a computer, a dictionary, and internet access)

at home, and how hard it must be to make friends and having to decline social invitations for lack of money, or feeling too ashamed to bring other kids over to the house for a sleepover. If a young child living in poverty was able to avoid or overcome these obstacles, I thought about how spending teenage years working multiple jobs and helping to raise siblings makes it even more difficult to graduate high school. I thought about how a teen living in poverty who surpassed these challenges and did graduate, and who was accepted to college, might have parents and friends who placed little value on education and who might pressure the teen to get a job instead of going to college. I thought of all of these significant, difficult, and, in many cases, debilitating challenges that people who are wealthy did not even have to consider as a result of growing up in homes where breakfast always was on the table and college always was part of their future.

I felt a quiet rage boil up inside of me, and I knew that it stemmed from a deep frustration that the people seated around me that night, and the many others with whom I had been in countless similar conversations, would have just the same success—or failure—rate as those who grew up poor. I felt angry that they took such a haughty stance of superiority, thinking that they were better than those living in poverty, when they never had to face—or even think about—the everyday challenges facing people who live in poverty. I felt angry that they were perpetuating the disillusion that the world worked on effort optimism, the belief that all it takes to succeed in the United States was hard work and determination.

As I seethed internally, I entertained ridiculous reality show-inspired thoughts of kidnapping everyone at the dinner table, cutting off their access to money, and forcing them to spend a year living as a person in poverty. The horrors! I envisioned their frustration at negotiating complex government programs located in multiple agencies all around town, their shame of buying groceries with food stamps, their exhaustion caused by having to take public

transportation—sometimes two or three bus lines—to commute to work or the grocery store, and then purchasing only groceries that they could physically carry home.

I also was frustrated with my inability, despite all my education, to convince this group of incredibly smart and compassionate people, including some of my closest friends, that they could do small things to change the system. *Your lack of action is keeping people in poverty*, I wanted to shout! *Do you even talk to any poor people? Do you do anything to help? Do you do anything to change the system that you criticize so much? Sure, the “system” is flawed, but we’re all part of “the system!”* Instead of yelling these things, however, I sat silently.

Many months later, I thought a lot about what I could have, and should have, said. At the time, I was not sure what the best ways were to overcome these misconceptions about poverty or how to get people who are not poor involved in working with and alongside those who live in poverty, or even the best ways of aiding people living in poverty in their efforts to aid themselves. However, since then, I have learned a lot.

I have learned that to best aid people who are impoverished in their efforts to move out of poverty, people, as a community, have to tackle big, messy, and complex systemic issues. I have learned that all people have to examine their role in perpetuating poverty and to seek out ways to build community with diverse community members, including the many people in local communities who live in poverty. I have learned that people need to be willing to change the things (e.g., expectations, ways of communicating, and daily practices) that they consider to be normal, recognizing that people who are marginalized (including people living in poverty) never had a say in creating what is “normal” but that they still are expected to abide by those rules. I have learned that if people truly want to end poverty, people need to redraw the lines of “us” and “them” to include those who currently are excluded, and communities need to be built on

equality and inclusion instead of on segregation and marginalization. Most of all, I have learned that all of these changes need to start at the level of interaction; by fostering high-quality interactions and, ideally, interpersonal relationships between people living in poverty and those who do not, such that those who are marginalized and disenfranchised can engage with and participate in communities that they have helped to create.

As such, in pursuing change, I am inspired by Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy's (1996) view of social justice:

Social justice is not a matter of "us" being hospitable and welcoming "them" into "our" community; it is an insistence that a community of integrity cannot exist if some are excluded. Social justice does not exist when "we" in our largess donate some of our disposable resources to "them"; it is done when we act on our recognition that something is amiss in a society of abundance if some of us are well off while others are destitute. Social justice is not done when "we" give our time and energy to help "them" escape from oppression; it is done when we realize that none of us is truly free while some of us are oppressed. (pp. 111–112)

This dissertation offers a small part of that solution by exploring a new concept that I label *interactional capital*, which describes the types of communication and other communicative resources held between people that build relationships and community. Understanding what these resources are and how they can be developed and maintained can lead researchers to uncover what it takes to build cross-class relationships, including between people living in poverty and those who do not. I hope that more researchers—in the field of communication and in other disciplines—will further develop this concept, to show how cross-class community members can build more diverse, inclusive, and just societies.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

As a “practical discipline” (Craig, 1989, 1995, 2001; Craig & Tracy, 1995), communication scholarship (both research and teaching), historically, has sought to make a difference in people’s lives (Frey, 2009), from educating individuals to become better public speakers and group decision makers to improving their abilities to process mediated messages (for a more complete review, see, e.g., Delia, 1987; Rogers, 1994). As Craig (2008) asserted, even “research scholars who may differ in their epistemological commitments still agree that communication research should be applicable to key normative questions and social problems” (p. 686). Today, scholarship, in general, and communication scholarship, in particular, that seeks to make a difference in people’s lives is known as *applied research* and *applied communication research*, respectively (see, e.g., Cissna, 1982, 1995; Cissna & Frey, 2009; Frey, 2006a; Frey & SunWolf, 2009; Kreps, Frey, & O’Hair, 1991; Seibold, 2008). As Cissna (1982) explained:

*Applied* research sets out to contribute to knowledge by answering a real, pragmatic, social question or by solving a real pragmatic, social problem. *Applied communication* research involves such a question or problem of human communication or examines human communication in order to provide an answer or solution to the question or problem. The intent or goal of the inquiry (as manifest in the research report itself) is the hallmark of applied communication research. Applied communication research involves the development of knowledge regarding a real human communication problem or question. (p. ii)

The types of real, pragmatic, social questions, issues, and problems addressed by applied communication scholars range considerably across the areas that comprise the communication discipline. Some applied communication scholars, for instance, are interested in interpersonal communication issues (such as communication between romantic partners; for recent studies published in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, see, e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Merolla, 2010), whereas others are interested in group communication (such as communication in social support groups; see, e.g., Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010) or organizational communication (e.g., such as employees' communicative practices; see, e.g., Feeley, Moon, & Kozey, 2010; Fonner & Roloff, 2010), and still others are interested in communication at the community, societal, and/or global levels (such as communication about climate change; see, e.g., Norton, Sias, & Brown, 2011), with many applied communication studies cutting across disciplinary areas.

One way in which applied communication researchers investigate such real-world questions, issues, and problems is by observing them and then offering, in their written reports directed to other scholars (e.g., journal articles), recommendations to answer or manage them (see Frey & SunWolf, 2009). Indeed, the minimum requirement for categorizing communication research as “applied,” according to the editorial policy of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, is that “all manuscripts must make explicit in a concluding section the practical advice derived from the research; i.e., how does the research explain, improve or understand communication practices or process in a specific context” (Jackson, 2012, para. 1). Other applied communication researchers, however, go beyond description and recommendation directed solely at scholars to work with individuals, groups, organizations, and larger entities to address pressing issues and problems, or what is called *engaged scholarship* (see, e.g., Authers,

Groeneveld, Jackson, Mündel, & Stewart, 2007; Barker, 2004; Boyer, 1990, 1996; Diener & Liese, 2009; Eschenfelder, 2011; Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010; Gebissa, 2009; Kecskes, 2006; Speed, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven & Zlotkowski, 2005; in the communication discipline, see Ackerman & Coogan, 2010; Applegate, 2002; Barge, Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; J. W. Carey, 2002; Carragee & Frey, 2012; Cheney, Wilhelmsson, & Zorn, 2002; Cherwitz, 2005; Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Frey & SunWolf, 2009; Hartelius & Cherwitz, 2010; Harter, Dutta, & Cole, 2009; Hikins & Cherwitz, 2010; Kahn & Lee, 2011; L. K. Lewis, 2012; Pezzullo, 2010; D. Pollock, 2010; J. L. Simpson & Shockley-Zalaback, 2005). Such collaboration typically takes the form of researchers working with groups and organizations that already have in place communicative practices (although those groups and organizations may not view them as such) that are designed to alleviate real-world problems. Many of those communicative practices are performed by groups of people and, consequently, they are called *collective communicative practices* (CCPs; see, e.g., Adelman & Frey, 1997; Brashers, Haas, Klinge, & Neidig, 2000; Clark, 1994; Eble & Breault, 2002; Frey, 1994, 2000; Frey, Adelman, & Query, 1996; B. Lloyd & Duveen, 1990; Rawlins, 1998). In some cases, applied communication scholars go beyond studying others engaging in collective communicative practices to design and implement such practices as interventions (see, e.g., Frey, 2000, 2006b).

Although there are a variety of issues/problems, sites, and CCPs toward which engaged applied communication scholars direct attention, one of the most important foci for such work is that of *social justice*. Social justice, from a communication perspective, according to Frey et al. (1996), involves “engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced . . . . [Researchers’ work] identifies and foregrounds the grammars that oppress or underwrite relationships of domination and then

reconstructs those grammars” (pp. 110, 112). Using their resources (e.g., communication theories, methods, pedagogies, and other practices), communication scholars “are in excellent positions to understand how language contributes to the unhealthy social and economic relationships that plague our society and the world” (Swartz, 2006a, p. 9), and to reconstruct those discourses to make society more just (for additional work and examples of social justice communication scholarship, see Alexander, 2010; Artz, 1997, 2001; Britt, 2012; Carragee & Frey, 2012; Crabtree, 1998; Dempsey et al., 2011; Frey, 1998a, 1998b; 2006a, 2009; Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Frey & Palmer, in press; Fixmer-Oraiz & Murray, 2009; Frey & SunWolf, 2009; Hartnett, 1998, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; J. R. Johnson, 2004; Leets, 2001; Makau, 1996; M. Morris, 2009; K. M. Olson & Olson, 2003; W. H. Papa, Papa, Kandath, Worrell, & Muthuswamy, 2005; Pearce, 1998; M. A. Pollock, Artz, Frey, Pearce, & Murphy, 1996; J. S. Simpson, 2006; Swan, 2002; Swartz, 2006; Swartz, Campbell, & Pestana, 2009; J. T. Wood, 1996; Zoller, 2010).

Social justice scholarship is “particularly valuable . . . [as] it has the potential to do good in society while expanding and transforming the theories, methods, and pedagogical practices of those who theorize, research, and teach about it” (Frey et al., 1996, p. 110). Moreover, as Frey and Carragee (2007b) argued, “There certainly is no shortage of controversial [social justice] issues confronting contemporary U.S. society” (p. 1). Indeed, Makau (1996) asserted that communication scholars “need only open our eyes in any part of this nation or world to witness the tragic toll of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, brutality, and violence” (p. 135). Accordingly, engaged applied communication researchers working from a “social justice sensibility” (see Frey et al., 1996) have focused on many important social justice issues/problems, including those related to class, gender, and race inequalities (e.g., Groscurth, 2012; Murphy, 1995; Orbe, 2007);

and the growing number of people, especially those of color, incarcerated in the prison-industrial complex and the continued use of capital punishment (e.g., Asenas, McCann, Feyh, & Cloud, 2012; Hartnett, 1998, 2011; Hartnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011; McHale, 2007; Novek, 2005; Novek & Sanford, 2007; Sunwolf, 2007). Such scholarship involves communication researchers working with groups and organizations to affect concrete social change.

The current study constitutes engaged applied communication research about the significant social justice problem of poverty. Specifically, the study focuses on an organization, called Longmont Circles, that employs CCPs to create community among a group of diverse individuals from different socioeconomic classes, including those who currently live in poverty, for the purpose of aiding the efforts of those who are impoverished to become self-sufficient (e.g., not rely on government subsidies to provide basic necessities) and, eventually, progress out of poverty. The purpose of this study is to further explore communicative community-building approaches to aiding the efforts of those who participate in Longmont Circles to move out of poverty. More specifically, the study (a) documents particular CCPs engaged in by those participants and (b) examine effects of those CCPs on participants' beliefs, attitudes, skills, feelings of empowerment, interpersonal relationships and sense of community, behaviors, goals and motivations, and ability to move out of poverty.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, including this first chapter. Chapter 2 reviews literature on two important issues related to this study—poverty and community—and it discusses the site and research goals of the study. First, I examine critical components of poverty, focusing on definitions and measurement methods, significant effects of poverty at individual and societal levels, systematic barriers to getting out of poverty, and efforts to address poverty, and then describe seven trends in communication research that has been conducted

about poverty and examine in some detail six case studies of programs that employ CCPs to address this significant social justice issue. Second, I explore the concept of “community” and how it relates to this study, and then examine strategies employed by the organization studied, Longmont Circles, to build community for the purpose of aiding people in their attempts to move out of poverty. Finally, in Chapter 2, I explain in more detail the two research goals of this study.

Chapter 3 describes the qualitative, ethnographic methods used to reach the goals of this research study; outlines the study; and discusses data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 documents the CCPs engaged in by participants at Longmont Circles to build community and to foster their self-sufficiency, and it outlines the effects of those CCPs on participants. Finally, Chapter 5 introduces and discusses a new conception of the communication being promoted through Circles, called *interactional capital*, which describes the types of communication and other communicative resources that facilitate the creation and maintenance of social capital through interactions with others. The chapter discusses the nature and effects of an interactional capital approach on participants at the individual, collective, and societal levels; and it explicates the implications of the study, both theoretically—with respect to relationships among poverty, communication, and community—and practically—with regard to what lessons learned from this analysis suggest might be best practices for antipoverty programs, including circles. Chapter 5 concludes by identifying some limitations of the research study and by offering future directions for applied communication scholarship to address the important problem of poverty.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH LITERATURE, SITE, AND PURPOSE

This chapter brings together two bodies of literature that are relevant to this study: (a) literature on poverty in the United States, focusing, in particular, on links between poverty and communication; and (b) literature on communication and community building. After reviewing these literatures, the chapter describes the organization that was studied for this research project—the Boulder County Circles Campaign and its Longmont branch (Longmont Circles)—explaining the mission and key practices of the organization, documenting the organization’s connections to communication and community building, and explaining why it was chosen as the site for this research study. The chapter concludes by outlining the two primary goals of this research project.

#### **Understanding and Addressing Poverty**

Poverty is a significant, pervasive, and detrimental social problem around the world. This section reviews the nature, significance, and effects of poverty in the United States, including ways that poverty has been addressed. First, I explain various ways of defining and measuring poverty in the United States. Second, I examine the significance and effects of poverty, both for individuals living in poverty and for all U.S. Americans. Third, I identify five important systematic barriers to getting out of poverty: unhealthy and unsafe housing situations, limited access to educational resources, decreased mobility due to limited transportation and communication options, limited access to health care, and the high monetary cost of living in

poverty. Fourth, I document some efforts by the federal government and nongovernmental organizations to address poverty.

### **Definitions and Measurements of Poverty**

Like many social issues, the language used to define and measure poverty is highly debated. Not only do people's understandings of what it means to be poor range over both place (e.g., poverty standards are much lower in "developing" countries than in "developed" countries) and time (e.g., poverty standards are higher today than they were in the early 20th century) but understandings of poverty also are reflective of contemporary social conditions. The following sections examine definitions and measurements of poverty.

**Defining poverty.** The narrowest understandings of poverty focus on people's inadequate consumption of material goods, link "well-being primarily to command over commodities" (Haughton & Khandker, 2009, p. 1), and view poverty largely in monetary terms. Broader definitions link poverty to nonmonetary forms of consumption, such as lack of housing or inadequate health care. The most comprehensive and perhaps most rigorous definitions of poverty, often attributed to Sen (1987), focus on individuals' economic capacity to function adequately in a society, a view that often prevails today. Most scholars agree that poverty cannot be defined as simply lacking the necessary means of survival, asserting that such a simplistic definition ignores the multitude of other factors (e.g., social, psychological, and emotional) that people who are impoverished may lack. Consequently, current explanations of poverty encompass not only deprivation of material necessities (e.g., food, water, and shelter) but also psychological (e.g., self-esteem, freedom, and respect), political (e.g., representation), and social (education and information) dimensions, as well as basic human rights and social justice. Highlighting a social justice orientation, the United Nations (Gordon, 2005) asserted that

“fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity”

(p. 4). Similarly, the World Bank (2011) defined poverty as

pronounced deprivation in well-being, and comprises many dimensions. It includes low incomes and the inability to acquire the basic goods and services necessary for survival with dignity. Poverty also encompasses low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of voice, and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one’s life. (para. 2)

Poverty also is both contextual and relative, in that it raises questions of what constitutes a luxury versus a necessity, with answers varying widely across time, geographic space, context, and individual perception. In the 18th century, A. Smith (1776/1994) defined the lack of “necessaries” as the inability to acquire “not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without” (pp. 351–352). In today’s society, these “decency needs” are hotly contested, with advocates arguing that they include a variety of both tangible and intangible resources that range from technologies, such as internet access, to treatment conditions, such as respect and dignity. Most people agree that, at minimum, humans require adequate food (one measure of which is having a body mass index of 17 or above), access to water that is less than 15 minutes away, sanitation facilities, health care (most indicators include treatment for serious illnesses, antenatal care, assistance with childbirth, and health information, particularly about HIV and AIDS prevention), and shelter (less than four people per room and adequate flooring, not mud), as well as access to education and to news information (e.g., newspaper, radio, or television news; telephones; and computers; Gordon,

2005). Those who do not possess these resources or the economic means to obtain these goods and services that are regarded as essential to human functioning are considered to be “poor.”

Another way to define poverty is by focusing on individuals’ ability to gain access to and acquire necessary resources to perform desired social roles. In this sense, “poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends, . . . [but, rather,] above all it is a relation between people” (Sahlins, 1972, p. 37). Noting that people inherently take on social roles as an important part of being community members, Townsend (1993) defined poverty as the lack of sufficient income to “play the roles, participate in the relationships, and follow the customary behavior which is expected of them by virtue of their membership of society” (p. 10). An emphasis on social roles with respect to poverty is important to the current study, which focuses on a program that builds community between those living in poverty and volunteers who do not, providing them with opportunities to practice taking on various social roles to build their resources, such that those living in poverty can empower themselves to move out of that condition.

**Measuring poverty.** In contrast to the contextual and relative definitions of poverty, the U.S. federal government’s definition of poverty is much narrower, and draws from the first (largely monetary) conceptualization. The government uses two somewhat different measures of the federal poverty standard: poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines. *Poverty thresholds*, the original version of the federal poverty measure, represent a set of income levels that are identified each year by the U.S. Census Bureau. Those thresholds vary by family size, number of children, and elderly status; and they are used primarily for statistical purposes, such as estimating the percentage of U.S. Americans living in poverty. *Poverty guidelines*, issued yearly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, essentially are a simplified version of the

U.S. Census Bureau’s numbers, and are used primarily for administrative purposes, such as determining individuals’ eligibility for Medicare benefits. For example, some programs determine eligibility based on a percentage multiple of the guidelines (e.g., 150% or less of the guidelines). According to the 2012 guidelines, the “poverty line” in the United States (for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia, excluding Hawaii and Alaska, and which are not defined for Puerto Rico or other outlying jurisdictions) for a family of four was \$23,050 (Sebelius, 2012; see Table 1 for a chart of the 2012 poverty guidelines).

Table 1

*2012 Poverty Guidelines for the 48 Contiguous States and D.C. (from Sebelius, 2012)*

Persons in family/household	Poverty guideline
1	\$11,170
2	\$15,130
3	\$19,090
4	\$23,050
5	\$27,010
6	\$30,970
7	\$34,930
8	\$38,890
For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$3,960 for each additional person.	

Both measures of poverty are derived from an absolute scale developed in 1963 and adjusted annually for inflation, known as the *poverty definition*. Determinations are made using money income (all earnings, unemployment and workers’ compensation, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, public assistance, veterans’ payments, survivor benefits, pension or retirement income, interest, dividends, rents, royalties, income from estates, trusts, educational assistance, alimony, child support, assistance from outside the household, and other

miscellaneous sources) before taxes, not including capital gains or noncash benefits (such as Medicaid, food stamps,<sup>1</sup> or housing subsidies). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), “If a family’s total income is less than the family’s threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered in poverty” (para. 1).

This 1963 definition was, and still is, based on the lowest cost “Economy Food Plan” (about 75% of the basic low-cost plan) developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and designed for families under economic stress, using data about the portion of income that families spend on food. That food plan, which allows for no eating at restaurants and necessitates careful management of food preparation and storage, often is critiqued as being impractical today and as inaccurately reflecting the minimal resources that families require.

Furthermore, aside from being adjusted for inflation and incorporating a different threshold for farming families, the poverty definition (which represents the economic basis for measuring poverty) has not been updated for nearly 50 years, despite significant changes in the economy, society, and public policy (e.g., the increased participation of mothers in the labor force and the resulting increased needs of childcare, increased health-care and insurance costs, and changes in standards of living). The U.S. Census Bureau (2011) explained that the poverty scale is “intended for use as a statistical yardstick, not as a complete description of what people and families need to live” (para. 3), but this scale has been criticized (see, e.g., Citro & Michael, 1995), and alternative measures (e.g., the Supplemental Poverty Measure) that consider factors such as taxes paid, medical and work expenses, and geographic differences in cost-of-living estimates increasingly are being employed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). For example, one alternative measure, the Basic Economic Securities Table (BEST) Index, measures the cost of economic security, and it estimates that a family with two working parents and two

young children needs a combined annual income of at least \$67,920—which represents fulltime work for both parents paid at \$16 an hour—to cover basic expenses and to save for emergencies and retirement (Wider Opportunities for Women & Center for Social Development, 2010).

### **Significance and Effects of Poverty**

Poverty, however it is defined and measured, is a significant social problem that affects a large number of people. The most recent (September 2010; data about 2011 will be released in September of 2012) data from the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 46.2 million people were living in poverty in the United States in 2010, or nearly 1 of every 6 U.S. Americans (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). The current poverty rate of 15.1% is the largest since 1993, and the number of people living in poverty (46.2 million, up from 43.6 million in 2009) is the highest in the 52 years that Census Bureau data have been collected (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011). As national poverty levels continue to increase (e.g., from 14.3% in the previous year on record, 2009; DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011), so does the need for empirical research about the effects of programs attempting to end poverty, especially programs that are based on or employ communication principles and practices.

The significance of poverty is compounded by its wide-reaching effects on society. As explained below, the repercussions of poverty range from immediate physical and psychological hardships that individuals living in poverty suffer to broader economic, social, and political consequences that affect all members of U.S. society.

**Individual effects of poverty.** At an individual level, poverty affects life expectancy, health and physical well-being, and social and psychological well-being. Each of these effects is explored further below.

***Life expectancy and death rates.*** Living in poverty has direct effects on life expectancy and death rates, as people living in poverty are more likely than those not living in poverty to die at younger ages (see, e.g., Geronimus, Bound, Waidmann, Colen, & Steffick, 2001). In fact, living in poverty may deprive individuals in the poorest communities of as much as 25% of the life expectancy enjoyed by individuals in the richest communities (Geronimus et al., 2001). In Geronimus et al.'s (2001) study, death rates in all geographic locations were so closely related to median household income that nearly all racial differences in white and black deaths were accounted for by income alone.<sup>2</sup> As a result, as McCord and Freeman (1990) noted about the 1980s, death rates in the poorest communities in the United States—including New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side—are higher than in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world. These statistics hold true today, as Central Harlem and South Side currently have death rates of 8.8 per 1000 (H. Evans, 2011) and 11.2 per 1000 (Chicago Department of Public Health, 2006), as compared to Bangladesh's death rate of 5.71 per 1000 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012). Furthermore, looking beyond extremes of wealth and poverty, there remains a continuous gradient in death rates in all socioeconomic classes of U.S. society based on status and class factors, such that the higher people's status, the longer they live (Wilkinson, 2005).

***Health and physical well-being.*** Poverty has direct effects on people's health and well-being (see, e.g., Ecob & Smith, 1999; Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Lynch, Smith, Kaplan, & House, 2004). For example, G. W. Evans and Schamberg's (2009) 14-year study documented the impact of living in poverty on adults' working memory, finding that the elevated chronic stress associated with an impoverished lifestyle contributes significantly to memory impairment. In fact, G. W. Evans, one of the researchers, explained that the link between poverty and

memory impairment was so strong that “the greater proportion of your childhood that your family spent in poverty, the poorer your working memory” (as cited in Stein, 2009, para. 15).

The health of children, in particular, is severely affected by living in poverty, as children raised in poor families, on average, are physically and emotionally sicker and cognitively slower (Lichter & Crowley, 2002; Sherman, 1994), and more undernourished (Human Nutrition Information Service, 1987), than their middle- and upper class peers. They also are twice as likely as other children to suffer from severe disabilities (Montgomery & Carter-Pokras, 1993), including stunted growth (J. E. Miller & Korenman, 1994), iron deficiency (Haltermann, Kaczorowski, Aligne, Auinger, & Szilagyi, 2001), and acute asthma (Weitzman, Gortmaker, Sobol, & Perrin, 1992); twice as likely to die from fatal accidental injuries (Children’s Defense Fund, 1995); five times as likely to be hospitalized for poisoning (Sherman, 1994); and significantly more likely to experience fatigue, frequent headaches, ear infections, and frequent colds (Wehler, Scott, Anderson, & Parker, 1991). These harmful effects can be attributed not only to the stresses of living at an unsustainable income level but also to family conditions that often accompany poverty (e.g., higher rates of family instability and lower levels of education, many of which are documented in this section).

***Social and psychological well-being.*** Living in poverty affects people’s social and psychological well-being, including increased stress, depression, insecurity, aggression, mental health, shame, and social anxiety, among others (see, e.g., Bruce, Takeuchi, & Leaf, 1991; Heflin & Iceland, 2009; Kessler & Cleary, 1980; Lipman & Offord, 1997; Najman et al., 2010). The sources of this stress and anxiety are not hard to pinpoint, and include many of the factors documented above, ranging from housing problems, safety fears, relational conflict, and financial insecurity. As Wilkinson (2005) explained:

The higher death rates suffered by people lower down the social hierarchy are, however, only half the injustice. The other half is that life is short where its quality is poor. . . . If lives were shortened primarily because people ate too many french fries or doughnuts, we could at least say their lives were short and sweet. But an important part of the reason for the shortening of life involves forms of social and psychological stress, including depression and anxiety, that dominate people's whole experience of life. (p. 18)

Additionally, as Charlesworth (2000) argued:

Living in a working class area it is impossible not to confront the presence of a powerful force touching all our lives; whether it be a force that drives one to steal, to be violent, use drugs, suffer mental illness or be quiet, resigned to misery, or, the most usual response, going out to forget one's problems (with drink or drugs), there is something at work in our society that has affected the working class very deeply, that has created fear, insecurity and disillusionment. (p. 196)

These social and psychological effects hit poor adolescents particularly hard, who, in comparison to their wealthier peers, are more likely to have lower self-esteem, be antisocial, and become delinquent (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Lichter & Crowley, 2002). More specifically, although the majority of youth who are poor are not violent and do not commit crimes, young adults living in poverty are more likely to commit theft or aggressive and violent acts during adolescence than are young adults who are not poor (Conger et al., 1994).

**Societal consequences of poverty.** Poverty also has broader reaching negative social, economic, and political consequences. In many ways, poverty contributes to the declining social health of a society, including diminished quality of family relationships; reduced involvement in community life; more hostile and less sociable societies; increased incidence of violence, drugs,

and antisocial behavior in communities; and environmental damage. Wilkinson (2005) documented three of the “most powerful” (p. 66) psychosocial influences on population health—low social status, weak social affiliations, and early life emotional difficulties—that increase as a result of poverty.

Poverty also directly affects the health of families. For example, two-parent families that are poor are twice as likely to break up than those that are not poor (Hernandez, 1992).

Additionally, Sherman (1994) found that poverty is the most significant factor in increasing the incidence of child abuse, with children living in poverty, as compared to children who are not poor, being more than 16 times more likely to suffer physical abuse, 18 times more likely to suffer sexual abuse, and 13 times more likely to suffer emotional abuse (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Additionally, the poverty rate for children under age 18 (22% in 2010; DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011) currently is, and historically has been, higher than the total poverty rate.

Poverty also adversely affects those who live in communities with a high prevalence of income inequality, even if they are not poor. High income-unequal communities contain members who are more hostile (Wilkinson, 1995) and violent (see, e.g., Daly, Wilson, & Vasdev, 2001; Fanjnzylber, Lederman, & Loayza, 2002; see also the metaanalysis conducted by Hsieh & Pugh, 1993); more intolerant and racist (Kennedy, Kawachi, Lochner, Jones, & Prothrow-Stith, 1997); less cohesive, less healthy, and less trusting of others (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997<sup>3</sup>); and who participate less in local government (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993). Additionally, women living in these income-unequal places have higher earning disadvantages relative to men (Blau & Kahn, 1992; Kawachi, Kennedy, Gupta, & Prothrow-Stith, 1999). Wilkinson (2005), thus, concluded that “societies that tolerate the injustices of great inequality will almost inescapably suffer their social consequences: they will be unfriendly

and violent societies, recognized more for their hostility than for their hospitality” (p. 36). In contrast, in more egalitarian societies, individuals are more trusting of each other (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997) and more communally oriented, socially connected, and civically engaged (Putnam, 2000).

Poverty also has significant adverse effects on the U.S. economy. For example, for every year that the current *child* poverty level is maintained, the United States loses an estimated \$177 billion in reduced future worker productivity and employment (Sherman, 1994). As another example, a recent study conducted by Collins (2012) in New Zealand found that those who lived in impoverished families for the first 10 years of their life earned approximately \$20,000 less each year by the age of 30, as compared to those who grew up in rich families. Moreover, in general, a decrease in poverty contributes to a healthy economy by increasing the nation’s collective purchasing power, which, in turn, stimulates economic growth and raises standards of living (see, e.g., Bluestone & Harrison, 2000).

Because of these significant and detrimental effects to living in poverty, both for individuals and for U.S. society at large, it is imperative that poverty be addressed. The problem of poverty is particularly severe in Colorado, where this research study was conducted, with the number of Colorado neighborhoods with at least 20% of people living in poverty doubling over the past decade, from about 1 in 10 to 1 in 5 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Even over the course of a year, 2008–2009, in Colorado, food banks reported a 25% increase in the amount of food distributed (with more than 76 million pounds last year), the number of people receiving food stamps increased by 26%, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) increased by 15%, and Medicaid enrollment for children increased by 18% (O’Connor, 2010). Furthermore, because the number of Colorado children living in poverty rose 72% between 2000 and 2008,

during that time period, Colorado had the fastest-growing child poverty rate in the United States (Cotter, 2010). Unfortunately, the child poverty rate continues to rise in Colorado (e.g., regarding Boulder County, where this research study was conducted, see, e.g., Aguilar, 2011) and other states.

Swift action, thus, is needed to fix the ever-increasing problem of poverty. However, solving poverty is no small task. Some observers have noted the complexity involved in understanding causes of poverty; as *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks (2012) put it, “The essential truth about poverty is that we will never fully understand what causes it. There are a million factors that contribute to poverty, and they interact in a zillion ways” (para. 3). Some of these factors include the significant individual and structural barriers that prevent people from moving out of poverty, many of which are documented in the next section of this dissertation.

Regardless of the complexity and difficulty of ending poverty, many people have asserted that poverty can and will be ended. For example, from a global poverty level, in his aptly titled book *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Times*, economist Jeffrey Sachs (2005) argued that extreme poverty can be ended worldwide in less than 30 years through a combination of carefully planned international aid (including debt cancellation for the poorest countries), directed progress toward the United Nations’ Millennium Development goals (United Nations, 2011), and policy reforms in poor countries. Additionally, speaking specifically about U.S. poverty, the founder of the national Circles Campaign to End Poverty (Circles), Scott C. Miller (2008), asserted that ending poverty can and will be done, but that it requires the belief that poverty actually can be dismantled, coupled with directed action. As S. C. Miller further explained:

The words “ending poverty” need to come to the forefront of our collective national consciousness. The mindset within our individual communities must change to allow for social strategies that can become big enough to get the entire job done. As a national—and ultimately, world—community, we need to stop normalizing the existence of poverty in the midst of wealth. We need to challenge our own personal assumptions about what is and is not possible. We need to believe that people in poverty who want to get out can do so when given enough opportunity and support. We must insist that everyone deserves to be supported while becoming prepared to participate in our country’s unprecedented prosperity. We need to believe that middle- and upper-income earners will choose lifestyles that contribute to a more sustainable society and a healthier environment—lifestyles that will help eradicate poverty. Poverty *can* be dismantled. That is the message that needs to be communicated to people sympathetic to the plight of those living without enough—to those able to see the connection between their own well-being and the well-being of everyone. (p. 9)

### **Systematic Barriers to Getting Out of Poverty**

Getting out of poverty is a difficult process, both for affected individuals and for communities and societies trying to aid those living in poverty to improve their situation. That process often is complicated because people who are poor frequently are trapped in a cycle of systematic barriers to getting out of poverty. As S. C. Miller (2008) explained:

Given the escalating costs of housing, healthcare, childcare, transportation, and food, people earning such meager incomes *cannot* pay for their basic needs. Our economic system does not provide enough livable wage jobs. Our communities do not provide

enough affordable housing. Our nation does not provide support for adequate health insurance, putting far too many people in jeopardy. (p. 21)

These barriers can be grouped into four categories: (a) unhealthy and unsafe housing situations, (b) limited access to educational resources and information technology, (c) decreased mobility due to limited transportation and communication options, and (d) limited access to health care.

The aggregation of these four systematic impediments is discussed below through a fifth barrier: the high monetary cost of poverty.

**Unhealthy and unsafe housing situations.** First, poverty diminishes people's freedom of choice over their living situation, with families living in poverty typically having less access to healthy homes and neighborhoods than do families that are not poor. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), children in poverty move from house to house nearly twice as often as do children from families that are not poor, are twice as likely to live in unsafe neighborhoods, and are nearly three times as likely to live in noisy, crowded homes with inadequate heating, peeling paint and falling plaster, leaky pipes, and infestations of mold, rats, and cockroaches (which causes and exacerbates allergies and asthma; Kang, Jones, Johnson, & Kang, 1989). Families living in poverty also are more likely to reside in areas where they are exposed to unhealthy chemicals and pollution, and they have less ability to move away from unhealthy areas, such as neighborhoods near toxic waste dumps, incinerators, pesticide-ridden fields, and high-pollution factories.

**Limited access to educational resources and information technology.** Second, an impoverished lifestyle limits access to educational resources and information technology, and it decreases the likelihood that young people will excel at school. Poor children often are less accomplished academically than those who are not poor (Lichter & Crowley, 2002), which can

be attributed, in addition to the physical and psychological health variables discussed earlier, to children who are poor having fewer resources for learning and to problems such as inferior child care (Galinsky, 1994); unaffordable textbooks, and fewer books, computers (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991), and educational materials in the home (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010); fewer stimulating hobbies, camp adventures, and family trips (Heyns, 1982); more financial barriers to attending college (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993); and more home and work responsibilities that prevent them from completing homework or studying (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). In particular, youth who are poor attend underfunded (K. Carey, 2005), overcrowded (Barton, 2004), and inferior schools (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2007; National Research Council, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1993), where underpaid (Karoly, 2001), substandard teachers (Keigher & Gruber, 2009) teach a less rigorous curriculum (Barton, 2004). For example, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2004) documented that low-income schools were more likely to have a high number of teacher vacancies, substitutes, and unlicensed teachers; inadequate learning facilities (e.g., no science laboratories); scarce and outdated classroom materials; dirty and inoperative student bathrooms; and even infestations of cockroaches or rats.

The lack of educational resources and inferior access to information technology affects the likelihood of children who are poor completing their education, with adolescents living in poverty being twice as likely to drop out of school as are middle-income adolescents, and 11 times more likely than wealthy adolescents, even when controlling for differences in race, ethnicity, and family structure (Children's Defense Fund, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Furthermore, when youth living in poverty complete high school, they are

significantly less likely to enroll in a 4-year college and only one quarter as likely to complete it, as compared to their wealthier peers (Eagle, Fitzgerald, Gifford, & Zuma, 1988). Education is a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty, with over half of the children in families that are poor headed by a person who did not graduate from high school (Children's Defense Fund, 2010).

The *digital divide*, which describes the disparity gap between individuals or communities that have access to information technologies and those that do not, has been of particular interest to researchers and activists addressing poverty. The digital divide not only has wide-reaching impacts on people affected by it (e.g., limiting access to social capital, job opportunities, cultural content, and information that is accessible only online; see, e.g., Lentz & Oden, 2001) but actually exacerbates inequality by limiting people's ability to technologically participate in the economy (P. N. Howard, Busch, & Sheets, 2010).

In relation to people living in poverty, research demonstrates that, geographically, poor urban areas have less access to information technology (Hawkins, 2005) and that disparities are related more directly to income, education, and race (Hess & Leal, 2001). In a recent TED (Technology Entertainment Design) talk, economist Aleph Molinari (2011) described how the digital divide affects people:

The digital divide is a mother that is 45 years old and can't get a job because she doesn't know how to use a computer. It is an immigrant that doesn't know he can call his family for free. It is a child that can't resolve his homework because he doesn't have access to information.

As such, the digital divide represents yet another way that people living in poverty are negatively affected by limited access to technology and educational tools.

**Decreased mobility due to limited transportation and communication options.**

Third, poverty limits economic opportunities and decreases mobility, and, as a result, makes it more difficult to go places and get things done. With less access to cars (and, hence, more reliance on public transportation and on shopping at stores within walking distance), it is more difficult to commute to work, bargain shop, and connect with friends. Additionally, poverty limits access to telephone (Zill, Moore, Smith, Stief, & Coiro, 1991), television, and internet service, and, as such, contributes to the social isolation of people who are poor.

**Limited access to health care.** Fourth, poverty substantially influences people's health, as it is more difficult for those living in poverty to afford health insurance, preventative and reactionary health services (e.g., physician and dentist appointments), health supplies (e.g., medicine and first aid supplies), and safety devices (including car seats and child-proofing materials; Sherman, 1994). D. L. Wood, Hayward, Corey, Freeman, and Shapiro (1990) explained that even among families receiving Medicaid, children "less frequently had a regular source of care, more frequently used emergency rooms . . . for their regular care, and more frequently encountered financial barriers to health care" (p. 671). Few physicians accept Medicaid, because rates of reimbursement from the government are lower than from insurance companies (Medicaid Access Study Group, 1994), and when medical care is received, it often is more stigmatized by others (including by providers; see, e.g., Ketsche, Adams, Minyard, & Kellenberg, 2007) and of lower quality than that received by families that are not poor (Braveman, Egerter, Bennett, & Showstack, 1991).

**The high monetary cost of poverty.** Taken together, these four systematic factors are not only difficult to overcome but also costly to endure (see, e.g., Schiller, 2001). There also are a myriad of other factors, costs, and expenses (e.g., bus fare, bank fees, and expenses associated

with living in higher crime neighborhoods) that make living in poverty more costly than living a lifestyle where money can be used to buy goods and services (e.g., a car and gas money to drive the extra distance to a big-box store, a second freezer to store items bought in bulk, and a washer and dryer to do laundry) that actually save money in aggregation. As Brown (2012) explained, “The poorer you are, the more things cost. More in money, time, hassle, exhaustion, menace” (p. F-8).

Take food, for example, which is a costlier expense for people living in poverty, who tend to live in areas with fewer supermarkets and foodstores (Kaufman, MacDonald, Lutz, & Smallwood, 1997). Additionally, supermarkets in low-income neighborhoods (and especially those in high-crime locations or with high populations of black or elderly residents; Hall, 1983) typically charge higher prices than those in higher income neighborhoods. Moreover, food stores (e.g., corner markets and bodegas), which often are found in low-income neighborhoods where supermarkets are scarce, have the highest food prices of all (Kaufman, MacDonald, Lutz, & Smallwood, 1997; P. Morris, Neuhauser, & Campbell, 1992). Brown (2012) documented these differences in a recent article on the high costs of living in poverty:

At a corner store here in Washington, D.C., a loaf of bread costs you \$2.99 for white. For wheat, it's \$3.79. The clerk behind the counter tells you the gallon of leaking milk in the bottom of the back cooler is \$4.99. She holds up four fingers to clarify. The milk is beneath the shelf that holds beef bologna for \$3.79. A pound of butter sells for \$4.49. In the back of the store are fruits and vegetables. The green peppers are shriveled, the bananas are more brown than yellow, the oranges are picked over. At a Safeway in suburban Bethesda, Md., the wheat bread costs \$1.19 and white bread is on sale for \$1.

A gallon of milk costs \$3.49—\$2.99 if you buy two gallons. A pound of butter is \$2.49.

Beef bologna is on sale, two packages for \$5. (p. F-8)

People who have money in savings accounts also avoid paying for goods and services that people living paycheck to paycheck have a harder time avoiding. For example, payday lending (also known as paycheck advances) is a form of subprime lending that consists of small-dollar (typically less than \$500; Elliehausen & Lawrence, 2001), short-term loans secured against borrowers' future (usually next) paycheck wages. Many people without enough financial savings and without access to low-cost credit turn to payday loans in times of need. These loans are a costly and often predatory service, and they are one of the highest risk subsets in subprime lending (Hodson, Owens, & Fritts, 2003). Payday loans require borrowers to give lenders a postdated check (e.g., dated on the borrower's next payday) in return for immediate cash, minus fees charged by the lender, which typically are exorbitant, averaging \$45 on a \$300 loan (Ernst, Farris, & King, 2004). Brown (2012) narrated the high cost of using these services:

First Cash Advance [has a] neon sign flashing “PAYDAY ADVANCE.” Through the bulletproof glass, a cashier in white eyeliner and long white nails explained what you need to get an advance on your paycheck—a pay stub, a legitimate ID, a checkbook. . . . And if you qualify, the fee for borrowing \$300 is \$46.50. That's not for a year—it's for seven days, although the terms can vary. How much interest will this payday loan cost you? In simple terms, the company is charging a \$15.50 fee for every \$100 you borrow. On your \$300 payday loan—borrowed for a term of seven days—the effective annual percentage rate is 806 percent. (p. F-8)

If borrowers cannot afford the fees on these payday loans, they often become trapped in a cycle or “debt trap” that “locks borrowers into revolving, high-priced short-term credit instead of

meeting the need for reasonably priced, longer-term credit” (Ernst et al., 2004, p. 2). The Center for Responsible Lending (2011) estimated that predatory payday lending alone (e.g., not including additional costs incurred as a result, such as bounced check fees, high interest rates, and bankruptcy fees) cost U.S. families upwards of \$4.5 billion each year.

Lastly, if, as the adage goes, time is money, because people living in poverty often lack the luxuries that wealthier individuals can purchase to “save time,” they are losing both time and money simply in the process of taking care of basic needs. For example, consider the time “paid” by going to a laundromat instead of washing clothes in the convenience of one’s home, taking the bus (or multiple busses) instead of driving directly to the destination, or using low-cost medical options instead of physicians who cater to people’s schedules.

Thus, the persistence of poverty in the United States, clearly, is more than just an “aggregation of individual failings” (Iceland, 2006, p. 2); it is deeply rooted in structural factors (many identified above), including perceptions and understandings of what poverty is, features of the U.S. economic system, social inequities, and in U.S. laws and policies. These systematic barriers show that poverty is a complex, multidimensional social problem that reaches far beyond simple purchasing-power conceptualizations. As such, poverty in the United States needs to be addressed, with various ways of addressing it explained below.

### **Responses to Poverty**

Many politically and academically affiliated people have claimed that poverty in the United States can and should be eradicated. In 1967, policy advisor James Tobin announced that it could be done by 1976. In 1971, Robert Lampman, economic advisor to President Lyndon Johnson, estimated that it could be done by 1980. However, by the 1980s, the problem of poverty in the United States had gotten only worse, leading President Ronald Reagan (1988) to

declare, “My friends, some years ago, the federal government declared war on poverty, and poverty won” (para. 26). The problem of poverty in the United States primarily has been addressed by providing antipoverty assistance to those who are poor (e.g., assistance with food, housing, clothing, transportation, health, and income support), and the responsibility of doing so rests largely on local human services or social services organizations (Reingold & Liu, 2009), including many expansive federal efforts and nongovernmental programs enacted at the local level. A significant proportion of U.S. Americans depend on these local agencies to meet their basic needs (Edin & Lein, 1997).

**Federal antipoverty efforts.** Federal antipoverty efforts in the United States have a long history (see Appendix A for a timeline of public assistance related to poverty in the United States), but with the exception of the establishment of public mental hospitals and orphanages, such efforts were slow to take off. Before 1862, public assistance for people living in poverty was enacted locally, and those who were poor, including orphans, often were confined to workhouses. The first federally funded social welfare program in the United States was the Sheppard-Towner Act, established in 1921, which provided funding for maternal and child health programs. Despite the fact that those programs significantly reduced the infant mortality rate, in 1929, the federal government repealed the Sheppard-Towner Act due to heavy lobbying by the American Medical Association, which argued that government-sponsored health care would interfere with physicians’ recommendations.

The 1930s saw the establishment of three important federal acts that significantly affected people living in poverty (and continue to do so today). First, in 1933, the U.S. government passed the Emergency Relief Act, which improved existing relief efforts by creating new unskilled jobs (e.g., in construction and the production of consumer goods) and professional

projects (e.g., for writers, artists, and musicians), and by diversifying existing relief programs (e.g., by including women). Second, in 1925, the U.S. government passed the Social Security Act, which established insurance and assistance for seniors, unemployment insurance for some workers (excluding agricultural and domestic laborers), and Aid for Dependent Children living in fatherless families. Third, in 1937, the U.S. government passed the Housing Act, which established federal low-rent public housing programs where the rent charged could not exceed 30% of renters' income.

The 1940s and 1950s also were decades that established gains in federal services for a few special populations. For example, the federal GI Bill (1945) provided World War II veterans with benefits for life, including funding for home mortgages, health care, and education; and the Mental Health Act (1946) allocated funding for psychiatric education and research, and it led to the creation of the National Institute of Mental Health. Two programs, in particular, were most directly related to people living in poverty. First, in 1946, the National School Lunch Act offered a free or reduced-cost lunch (and sometimes breakfast) to low-income students in public and private nonprofit schools, and to adults and children living in poverty who were in day-care programs. Second, the early 1950s expanded the array of services offered to people living in poverty through the establishment of both the Social Security Act and Aid for Dependent Children program, which was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and offered cash assistance primarily to single mothers. However, the AFDC also contained a variety of unconstitutional restrictions on individuals' behavior; for example, the AFDC's "man-in-the-house" rule denied otherwise qualified children from receiving welfare benefits if their mother was living, or having relations, with any single or married able-bodied male, because the man was considered to be a substitute father. These unconstitutional AFDC restrictions later

were successfully contested during political activism associated with the welfare rights movement in the early 1960s.

Perhaps most (in)famously, the United States declared a “war on poverty” in 1964 that resulted in the institution of federal antipoverty programs, such as the Food Stamps program, the Equal Opportunity Act, Medicare and Medicaid, and Head Start. These programs steadily reduced the percentage of people living in poverty until the late 1970s, when increasing inflation began to significantly erode the value of the government’s monthly payments to families with dependent children (Albeda, Folbre, & The Center for Popular Economics, 1996). The 1970s also saw the establishment of the Pell Grant program, which provided educational support for students from low-income families who were working on their first bachelor’s degree at an accredited institution; the Women, Infants, and Children Food and Nutrition Information Program (WIC) that provided women and children living in poverty with food vouchers and nutrition counseling; the Legal Services Corporation, which provided to those who were poor legal services in civil (not criminal) matters (e.g., family law, consumer fraud, and job benefits); and improvements to both child support enforcement programs and to Social Security.

The 1980s also was a time of significant change; in this case, a time of relative economic prosperity that had the unfortunate backlash of fostering a general ideology that those who are poor lack motivation and skills to work rather than being denied opportunities or funding. For example, The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), established in the mid-1970s, but continuing throughout the 1980s, was designed to promote job training and to emphasize work. Soon after, the Omnibus Reconciliation Act was passed, which decreased the availability of public service jobs and cut benefits to low-income workers. In 1988, the Family Support Act was passed, which created the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program

(JOBS), a welfare-to-work program to provide AFDC recipients with opportunities for education, training, and jobs as a means of avoiding long-term welfare dependency.

The 1990s witnessed significant recoil against welfare programs, as evidenced in the laws and programs passed during that decade. For example, in 1990, many states begin to retaliate against the AFDC program by imposing new restrictions for AFDC families (e.g., “Learnfare,” which penalized families with children not regularly attending school, and family caps, which provided no additional aid for children born to families that already were on assistance). Notably, in 1996, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which fundamentally changed the method and goal of the federal cash assistance program for those who are poor by restructuring welfare programs (e.g., ending welfare as an entitlement program) and shifting the federal welfare responsibility in favor of increased state autonomy. Furthermore, in 1997, the TANF program (established as a part of PRWORA) went into effect, supplanting both the AFDC and the JOBS programs, and further reducing federal welfare by placing time limits on welfare assistance (e.g., a maximum of 60 months of benefits in a lifetime), imposing stricter conditions for Food Stamps programs, and reducing immigrant assistance.

The most recent federal effort to aid people living in poverty was the establishment of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (often referred to as the Stimulus Act). As a response to the current economic downturn, the Stimulus Act was designed to immediately save and create jobs (e.g., in infrastructure investment and energy research) through tax incentives and by reversing many of the Clinton-era welfare-to-work provisions. The act also provided temporary relief programs for those most affected by the economic downturn.

At present, there are two major categories of federal public benefit programs: “means-tested” programs (including cash assistance programs funded by the TANF grant or non-cash benefits, such as food stamps or housing assistance), which limit assistance to low-income recipients; and “universal programs” (including Social Security and unemployment insurance), which place no limits on amount of income earned. In 2005, means-tested programs raised 14 million low-income U.S. citizens above the poverty line, with the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) being responsible for 5.1 million (of the total 14 million), and the Food Stamps program following closely behind at 4 million people (Sherman, 2009). Food stamps, in particular, are critical to providing food to people living in poverty. For example, over the past several decades, approximately half of all U.S. children resided in a household that received food stamps (Rank & Hirschl, 2009), and the number of people currently on food stamps—nearly 40 million—is the highest on record. Wise (2009), however, cautioned that “one should not mistake the high participation rate documented by Rank and Hirschl (2009) as reflecting a generous eligibility standard” (p. 1063), as a family of four must make less than \$29,064 in gross yearly income to be eligible for food stamps (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Given their substantial influence, the impact of public benefit “safety-net” programs cannot be overlooked. Sherman (2009) estimated that in 2005, such programs protected 31 million people from poverty (reducing the number of U.S. Americans living in poverty by 44%), and kept another 34 million from slipping below half of the poverty line. However, despite their relative effectiveness, current antipoverty policies represent only a fraction of the federal budget, and have beneficial, but limited, effects. Additionally, safety-net programs, in particular, are becoming less effective, particularly at aiding jobless workers and families with children living in deep poverty (Sherman, 2009), and those programs do little to aid people living in poverty

build social or material capital to move out of poverty. Furthermore, governmental approaches to poverty, in general, tend to be limited in their level of support and, historically, have attended to improving particular characteristics of people living in poverty (e.g., their work orientation) rather than focusing on improving systematic issues (e.g., discrimination and minimum wage laws; Grønbjerg, 1990). As such, alternative solutions are needed.

**Nongovernmental programs to end poverty.** Related more directly to the focus of this study are nongovernmental organizational program-based efforts to end poverty. According to Grønbjerg and Paarlberg (2001), nonprofit organizations often arise “to meet demands for particular types of goods and services that cannot be adequately met by the market or government sectors” (p. 687). One reason that nonprofit organization may be better than governmental organizations at addressing these unmet demands is because nonprofits do not face the same challenges (e.g., bureaucratic demands for accountability, policy requirements, and political differences) and, therefore, can “compensate for governmental failures” (Grønbjerg & Paarlberg, 2001, p. 688). Furthermore, Marwell (2004) argued that the primary value of local nonprofit organizations is as “mediating institution[s]” (p. 266), responsible for providing direct services (e.g., childcare, youth development projects, senior care, and job training) to those who are impoverished. Indeed, research shows that nonprofit organizations are the primary provider of these direct services (Katz, 1996; Marwell, 2004; S. R. Smith & Lipsky, 1993). For these reasons, as well as many others, a gradual but “massive shift in responsibility for antipoverty policy” (Silver, 2004, p. 606) has occurred over the past 20 years, with nonprofit organizations taking on more and more responsibility over governmental programs.

Like government programs, these nonprofit efforts to address poverty vary widely in purpose and scope, ranging from church-sponsored charity efforts (see, e.g., Littlefield, 2010) to

broad community-organizing endeavors (see, e.g., Silver, 2004). Program-based efforts to reduce poverty and its effects include service, advocacy, social work, education, legislation or policy efforts, charity, and resource distribution (e.g., money, food, jobs, and health care). Included in this list is the organization investigated in this study, which, as explained later, uses a relationally based, social capital approach to confront poverty.

### **Communication Research on Poverty**

Poverty has been approached by a wide range of academics, including by some communication scholars. The section first below describes seven trends demonstrated in the communication research that has been conducted on poverty, followed by explanations of five case studies of programs that focus on communicative practices to address poverty.

#### **Ways that Communication Scholars have Studied Poverty**

A search of the ComAbstracts and Communication & Mass Media Complete databases for peer-reviewed scholarly research on poverty and homelessness revealed that since 1969, less than 100 articles studying poverty as a primary topic were published in communication journals listed in those two databases. That communication research has addressed poverty in seven ways: (a) representations of poverty or homelessness in media (e.g., in network news), (b) behaviors or characteristics of people living in poverty (e.g., use of technology or communication style), (c) how people living in poverty are treated or perceived by others (e.g., by teachers or health-care providers), (d) the discourse of organizational employees who work on issues of poverty (e.g., teasing practices engaged in by staff in a homeless advocacy organization), (e) street newspapers (e.g., Australia's *Gibber*), (f) U.S. poverty as a *secondary* topic in relation to other issues (e.g., Hurricane Katrina or digital democracy), and (g) the effects of programs that employ communicative practices and strategies to aid people living in poverty

(e.g., a communication activism endeavor to develop a small business for and with people living in poverty).

First, most communication scholars who study poverty have focused on representations of poverty or homelessness in news media (see, e.g., Abril, 2010; Agar, 1991; Aram, 2008; Banda, 2008; Berger, 2009; R. Campbell & Reeves, 1989; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Dagron, 2004; de Goede, 1996; Gilens, 1996; Gould, Stern, & Adams, 1981; Huckin, 2002; Jeppesen, 2009; Kensicki, 2004; Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010; Kumar, 2008; Li & Polumbaum, 2006; Meehan, 1986; Mohr, 2008; Nash, 2008; Neuman, 1990; Nielsen, 2008; K. K. Olson, 2002–2003; Omenugha, 2005; Penner & Penner, 1994; Redden, 2011; Shields, 2001; Summers, 2008; Thorton & Shah, 1996; van de Fliert & Hien, 2009; Verzola, 2008), fictional television (Gray, 1989) or fictional radio soap operas (Skuse, 2002), documentary films (Loehwing, 2010), informational flyers (Resende, 2009), and college textbooks (Clawson & Kegler, 2000). These studies overwhelmingly show that the media—both in the United States and internationally—often paint a distorted and biased portrait of poverty, frequently stigmatize people living in poverty, foster distinctions between “us” and “them,” and focus on poverty during seasonal times (e.g., holidays or colder weather) rather than explore substantive changes in issues surrounding poverty (e.g., new laws affecting people who are homeless). For example, Shields’s (2001) content analysis of network news coverage of homelessness throughout the 1980s and early 1990s found that network media coverage “fortified political discourse of elites . . . [by] presenting an inaccurate portrait of the homeless population” (p. 194), either by sanitizing the suffering out of newscasts or framing those who were homeless as harmful deviants.

Additionally, demographic characteristics of people living in poverty often are distorted by misrepresentative news media coverage. Specifically, news coverage of poverty tends to

overrepresent blacks (and especially black children<sup>5</sup>), females, inner-city locations, and nonworking poor; and underrepresents whites, Asians, Hispanics, and “sympathetic subgroups of the poor” (Gilens, 1996, p. 515), including the elderly or working poor; such coverage also focuses more heavily on links between poverty and gangs and crimes than national statistics indicate (Blank, 1996; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Gilens, 1996). For example, Clawson and Trice (2000) found that news magazine photographs would lead readers to believe that half of all people living in poverty are black, when, in reality, statistics show that blacks make up a little more than one quarter of the population of people living in poverty.

In addition to being represented inaccurately by the media, other studies show that people who are poor are underrepresented in media coverage and overlooked as an intended audience of media viewers. Nielsen (2008), for instance, found that whereas “the poor are represented regularly in supportive but conditional tones of hospitality in newspaper reports, journalists rarely address the poor as their imagined or implied audience” (p. 605), which limits the general public’s understanding of poverty and exclude the voices of those living in poverty from civic dialogues. Moreover, when people who are poor are depicted in media coverage, they are portrayed in limited ways, with Howley (2003) explaining that “typically, mainstream media coverage of homelessness falls into one of two broad categories: the sensationalized coverage of the tragic death of an ‘anonymous’ street person or the ‘feel-good piece’ on charitable giving” (p. 280) that focuses on the actions of volunteers who are not poor.

Second, other communication research has documented behaviors or characteristics of people living in poverty, such as their communication styles (Donohew & Singh, 1969; Washington & Craig, 1994), communication skills (Furey, 2011; Justice & Ezell, 2001; Law, McBean, & Rush, 2011; O’Neil-Pirozzi, 2003, 2006; Pruitt, Oetting, & Hegarty, 2011), creative

writing (Weinstein, 2007) or rhetoric (Antaki, 2001; J. L. Campbell, 1988); health literacy (Herman & Jackson, 2010; Mosavel & El-Shaarawi, 2007) or health message preferences (Krishman, 1996; Marshall, Smith, & McKeon, 1995); identity construction (Berman, 2000; Van De Mieroop, 2011; Wamucii, 2011); romantic and sexual development (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003); self-reports of income and expenditures (Mangahas, 1995); social demands and stress (Durden, Hill, & Angel, 2007); social networks (Curley, 2009; Evaldsson, 2007; Kleit, 2010; Way, Cowal, Gingold, Pahl, & Bissessar, 2001); social support and academic outcomes (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998); sociospatial strategies of control (Kaplan, 2008); trustworthiness (Bahr & Houts, 1971); use of technology (Mosavel, 2005; Schmitz, Rogers, Phillips, & Paschal, 1995; Skuse & Cousins, 2008) or media (Dordick & Rachlin, 1997; Greenberg & Dervin, 1970; Mielke, 1994; Warren, 2005); and or on the general culture or characteristics of poverty (Roseberry-Mckibbin, 2000) or homelessness (Fiske, 1991; Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005). Although these behavior-focused studies represent the population of people living in poverty more accurately than do media portrayals, and although some studies in this grouping suggest practical changes that can be made to benefit the lives of people who are poor (see, e.g., Harter et al., 2005), primarily, these studies document practices of people living in poverty rather than successful strategies for how people can move out of poverty.

Third, other communication scholarship has focused on how people living in poverty are treated or perceived by others, such as during homeless shelter intake interviews (Leeman, 2011), how teachers treat students in low-income public schools (Cooper, 1970; Richardson, Alexander, & Castleberry, 2008), and how asthmatic Medicaid patients are treated by health-care providers (Gillespie, 2001), or they focus on general perceptions of poverty (Gandy & Baron,

1998; Shaw & Shapiro, 2002; Sotirovic, 2001) or how people living in poverty are overlooked (e.g., by people conducting telephone surveys, Blumberg & Luke, 2007; T. P. Johnson, Young, Campbell, & Holbrook, 2006) or generally alienated by others based on their apparent low-income status (Daniel, 1970). These studies show that people living in poverty are stigmatized and marginalized by others—even those who try to aid them—in many of the same ways that they are stigmatized by the media. For example, Gillespie (2001) showed how the many administrative and medical hoops that low-income asthmatic patients were required to maneuver through during routine practices “can create a process of disenfranchisement that does further violence to [their] bodies” (p. 98).

Additionally, Gandy and Baron (1998), Gilens (1996), and Sotirovic (2001) found that public perceptions of people living in poverty are consistent with (and often created by) the often-distorted media depictions. For example, Sotirovic (2001) found that people tend to misperceive welfare recipients as younger, disproportionately living in cities, and as receiving higher monthly welfare payments and staying on welfare for much longer than official statistics demonstrate, and both Sotirovic (2001) and Gilens (1996) found that the public perceives people living in poverty to be disproportionately black. The findings from this research on perceptions of those who are poor by those who are not is consistent with those of the research conducted about the media in terms of the frequency and depth to which people living in poverty are stigmatized.

Furthermore, such research extends links between media portrayals of people in poverty and public perceptions of poverty by demonstrating how negative portrayals of people living in poverty fostered by inaccurate or biased media programming can discourage support for welfare programs by viewers of television national news and cable news programming who are not living

in poverty (Gilens, 1996; Sotirovic, 2001). Those stigmas or stereotyped perceptions of people in poverty also can cause problems in interactions between people who are poor and those who are not; for example, by compelling homeless street vendors to perform in a specific way that enacted an “authentic homeless identity” (Lindemann, 2007, p. 42) or else risk that identity being contested by potential customers.

Fourth, some scholars have studied the discourse of organizational employees who work on issues of poverty. Kingfisher (1996), for instance, examined strategies of resistance and accommodation demonstrated by employees at two welfare rights groups; K. Miller, Scott, Stage, and Birkholt (1995) studied interorganizational coordination among human services providers; and Yedes (1996) studied practices of teasing and kidding among staff in a homeless advocacy organization. These studies are interesting accounts of organizations and employees making a difference in the lives of people who live in poverty, and are similar in purpose to the current study, in that they document the use of CCPs—such as strategies of resistance and coordination—in organizations working on issues of poverty. However, that research focuses on organizational staff members rather than on volunteers or on people living in poverty (e.g., with the research showing how resistance strategies benefit welfare rights workers, but not people receiving welfare), and, as such, they have limited benefit to the study of communication strategies that are attempting to facilitate change in the lives of people living in poverty.

Fifth, street newspapers also have received attention from communication researchers studying efforts to end poverty (see, e.g., Hindman, 1998; Howley, 2003; Llewellyn, 2011; Sexton & McKee, 2001; Torck, 2001). For example, Torck’s (2001) discourse analysis compared the content of European street newspapers (which tend to limit the platform of authors who are homeless to personal narratives and poetry) and U.S. street newspapers (which greatly

broaden the content written by those who currently or formerly are homeless, and which speak to a more diversified range of homeless issues). Howley (2003) concluded that street newspapers (typically written by citizens instead of by journalism professionals), as compared to key features of public journalism (which are written by journalism professionals), are distinct in that they make a commitment to communicative democracy. Sexton and McKee (2001) explored how Australia's *Gibber* street magazine provides young people living in poverty with a sense of identity, community, and education, as well as being a place where they can express their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Hindman (1998) examined the problematic dual commitments of an inner-city neighborhood newspaper that attempted to enact both mainstream and alternative journalism. Similar to studies of the discourse of people who work on issues of poverty rather than of people living in poverty, this research focuses on the discourse of street newspapers rather than on their impoverished readers, writers, or vendors, making them of limited relevance to the current study.

Sixth, 47 additional studies have focused on U.S. poverty as a *secondary* topic in relation to other issues, including (listed alphabetically): AIDS campaigns (Elwood, 2002; Haejin & Govender, 2001; Hoffman-Goetz, Friedman, & Clarke, 2005; Pullen, 2008; Yun, Govender, & Mody, 2001); chronic disease (Engelgau, Rosenhouse, El-Saharty, & Mahal, 2011); community organizing for cooperative governance or economic and social development (Overton de-Klerk & Oelofse, 2010; M. J. Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & W. H. Papa, 2000; M. J. Papa, Singhal, & W. H. Papa, 2006); compassion fatigue (Kinnick, Krugman, & Cameron, 1996); digital democracy and telecommunications development (Barrantes & Galperin, 2008; Forestier, Grace, & Kenny, 2002; Fortner, 1995; Hacker, 2002; Haddon, 2000; Lee, 2007; McAnany, 1978; Micky, 2007; Nunn, Kadel, & Karpyn, 2002; Oyedemi, 2009; Tacchi, 2008); drug treatment programs (Carr,

2006); field survey methods (Schwartz, 1970); the social construction of celebrity and urban legend (M. Lloyd & McGovern, 2008); global divides (Srebernyl, 2009); historical information graphics (Kimball, 2006); Hurricane Katrina (Lachlan, Burke, Spence, & Griffin, 2009); journalism seminar projects (McLean, 1978); strategies to teach language skills to children (Cain, Eaton, Baker-Ward, & Yen, 2005; Justice, Mashburn, Pence, & Wiggins, 2008; McCathren, 2010) or adults (Goldenberg & Patthey-Chavez, 1995); verbal and physical abuse propensities (S. R. Wilson, Hayes, Bylund, Rack, & Herman, 2006); views on academic life (Foeman, Anderson, Pugh, & Pearson, 1996); women's empowerment (Luthra, 2003); or as a part of policy assessment, political debates, and politicians' platforms (Asen, 2001, 2003; Berardi, 2001; Carcasson, 2006; Cloud, 1998; Gring-Pemble, 2003; Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005; Marston, 2008; Shen & Edwards, 2005; Sherr, 1999; Sotirovic, 2000; Weber, 2009; Zarefsky, 1977). Because poverty was not the primary focus of these studies, they are only of indirect relevance to the current study.

Finally, and pertaining most directly to the present research, a book and 14 articles studied the effects of programs that implemented communicative practices to aid people living in poverty. Tompkins's (2009) book, for instance, chronicled his work as a volunteer with the St. Francis Center in Denver, Colorado, documenting the practices and principles of the center, and showing how coordinated action and effective communication can be used as tools to combat homelessness. As another example, O'Neil-Pirozzi (2009) conducted an experimental intervention with homeless parents of preschoolers residing in family homeless shelters to increase parents' ability to help their children acquire language skills. Ginossar and Nelson (2010) examined community participative communication interventions where bilingual, low-literacy-level websites and training were created for and with Latino/as living in poverty that

educated members of their community about health information and care. Additionally, studies (Auwal, 1996; M. J. Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997; M. J. Papa et al., 2006) have explored microcapitalism services at the Grameen Bank developed for and by people living in poverty in Bangladesh. In contrast to much of the research explored above that focuses on representations, characteristics, behaviors, or perceptions of people living in poverty, or on the discourse of people who work on issues of poverty, this communication research investigates interventions that are designed to make a positive difference for people who live in poverty.

Six of these programs that employed communicative practices to alleviate poverty or its effects are explored in more detail below. Although most of the researchers did not develop or facilitate the programs themselves (one notable exception is W. H. Papa, Papa, & Buerkel, 2012), as would be done in communication activism for social justice scholarship (see Carragee & Frey, 2012; Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012), all of them spent considerable time in the organizations that conducted the programs and many of them worked directly as volunteers with the people living in poverty who they studied. These programs included a street newspaper program that aimed to “flip the scripts” of poverty (Novak & Harter, 2008), a communication activism endeavor to develop a small business for and with people living in poverty (W. H. Papa et al., 2012), a community dinner program that builds community by managing the dialectic of unity and fragmentation (W. H. Papa et al., 2005), an electronic network designed to connect community residents together in a comprehensive communication forum (Schmitz et al., 1995), a job-training program that develops people’s communication competencies (Waldron & Lavitt, 2000; Waldron, Lavitt, & McConnaughy, 2001), and a communications technology model designed to build “community, empowerment, and self-sufficiency” (Pinket & O’Bryant, 2003, p. 187) among the predominately African-American residents of a low-income housing

development. These six programs were chosen because they are exemplars of communication programs enacted with and on behalf of people who live in poverty.

### **Communication-Based Programs Enacted to Benefit People Living in Poverty**

**“Flipping the scripts” of poverty through a street newspaper.** Novak and Harter (2008) conducted a case study of Chicago’s *StreetWise* (also explored in Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, & Carson-Stern, 2004), one of the nation’s most fiscally viable street newspapers, which provides people who are homeless with “entrepreneurial alternatives to panhandling” (p. 392) through job opportunities as newspaper vendors. This approach to solving poverty has longer lasting effects than do programs that provide aid in the form of money or food handouts, as this approach “integrates vendors in broader community life by providing employment and raising awareness about poverty-related issues” (Novak & Harter, p. 392), and, in doing so, the program engages broader communities in a conversation about issues related to homelessness. Novak and Harter explored how *StreetWise* vendors and staff build community and engage in democratic CCPs to mobilize material and symbolic resources for those living in poverty. In particular, the researchers focused on discursive practices that *StreetWise* uses to “flip the scripts” of poverty by (a) communicatively reframing newspaper vending as “real” work, (b) maintaining the newspaper as a purchased commodity (and, as such, discouraging the practice of donating without taking a newspaper), and (c) establishing ties between street vendors and the broader community.

First, to legitimize street newspaper vending and to differentiate it from panhandling, Novak and Harter (2008) showed how *StreetWise* requires vendors to adopt a professional code of conduct that includes discursive practices of using professional language and refraining from asking for donations. This communicative code of conduct is reinforced in staff meetings and in

*StreetWise* buttons and office posters. In turn, vendors adopt this professional language in their discourse about *StreetWise*—including referring to a period of work as a “shift,” downtime as “breaks,” and donations as “tips”—which rationalizes vending as legitimate work and, simultaneously, works to “disrupt the dominant script of work” (Novak & Harter, p. 410). These CCPs create and maintain a discourse in the Chicago community that vending is legitimate work, and, as a result, they shift critics’ perceptions of vending from illegal panhandling to legal work.

Second, *StreetWise* employs a CCP that Novak and Harter (2008) labeled “read the paper, take the paper,” which frames street newspapers as a purchasable commodity rather than as a post-donation prize. *StreetWise* vendors discourage people from making donations without taking a newspaper because doing so reifies vending as an act of panhandling and represents a lost opportunity to disseminate the newspaper and make homeless issues public. The communicative practices involved with “getting the paper into the hands of the customer” are tricky, in that doing so “requires vendors to delicately balance on a line between sales and harassment” (Novak & Harter, p. 403), but that balance is maintained through specific strategies encouraged by *StreetWise*, such as physically extending the newspaper and verbally encouraging customers to purchase it.

Third, *StreetWise* encourages CCPs that facilitate connections between vendors and broader communities. For example, vendors are encouraged—often through economic incentives, such as receiving 25 free newspapers (which can be sold for a profit at \$1 per paper)—to attend community meetings (i.e., Community Action Policing Strategy meetings), which increase the presence of vendors in the Chicago community and provide a forum where their often-underrepresented voices can be heard. By facilitating human connection through communication, “*StreetWise* is helping to connect people, allowing vendors to liberate

themselves, and in turn, showing non-*StreetWise* populations that vendors are ‘okay’ that they ‘have something to say’ and are ‘intelligent’” (Novak & Harter, 2008, p. 407). *StreetWise* promotes dialogic practices—such as engaging in public discourse in community meetings or with potential buyers on the street—that foster a sense of community connection as a means of integrating vendors into the Chicago community and building their social capital through those connections.

Although documenting *StreetWise*’s CCPs was not a primary focus of Novak and Harter’s (2008) study, they highlighted the importance of engaging in those practices as a means of facilitating social change. Specifically, *StreetWise*’s successful approach to creating employment opportunities for people who are homeless is based on the understanding that dominant discourses of work delegitimize street vending as a respectable job and, as such, the newspaper required that vendors practice particular CCPs to legitimize their jobs and to create a “counternarrative” (Novak & Harter, p. 408) to dominant beliefs about street vendors. Without the use of these communicative strategies, *StreetWise* risked diminishing the success of the newspaper and reducing its positive impact on vendors, as “the very demand for a counternarrative demonstrates an astute awareness on the part of staff that providing opportunities for people to vend does not guarantee that they will be able to fully participate in community life” (Novak & Harter, p. 408). This case study, thus, focused on a well-organized communication program that makes a significant impact in the lives of people living in poverty.

**Using “Good Gifts” to develop a small business for and with people living in poverty.** W. H. Papa et al. (2012) engaged in a communication activism endeavor to develop a small business, called “Good Gifts,” for and with people living in poverty in Athens, Ohio. The project’s founders—two of whom were professors at Ohio University (OU)—collaborated with

administrators of a local social services organization for people living in poverty, and with OU students and faculty, to provide job training and to create living wage jobs for people in poverty.

A primary focus of the project was to create connections between people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and career paths (i.e., between university students and adults who are unemployed and living in poverty), to organize for social change. The process of building connections between “people who are radically different from one another” (W. H. Papa et al., 2012, p. 394) poses particular challenges and requires skillful use of CCPs to overcome barriers to connection. As W. H. Papa et al. (2012) explained:

People who are poor and those with resources often differ in access to and quality of education; those living in poverty often wonder where their next meal will come from, with survival being a day-to-day reality, whereas people with resources are able to plan for the future; health outcomes are more negative for people living in poverty; and people with resources often are embedded in many communication networks, whereas people living in poverty often experience a life of isolation. These differences are real and can pose significant barriers to people connecting with one another, but as this organizing for social change initiative shows, these barriers can be overcome, and when they are, people who are poor learn and accumulate experiences that can lead to their economic and social development. (p. 394)

To facilitate these connections and foster cross-class community building, project participants engaged in CCPs that created opportunities for people to empower themselves (e.g., constructing scenarios to help Good Gifts salespeople—who were living in poverty—communicate confidently with potential student buyers, and encouraging cross-class dialogue) and integrate

feminist principles of organizing (e.g., fostering cooperative enactment instead of competition, and valuing integrative thinking and connectedness) into business practices.

The business was a success on many levels: It excelled financially as a small business and continues to operate today, did well as a social program that created 35 new job-training experiences for people living in poverty in the 9 years since the business' founding, thrived as an educational service-learning experience for OU students, and succeeded as a communication activism endeavor in connecting people from different social classes through principles and practices of social justice and of critical pedagogy. However, as W. H. Papa et al. (2012) asserted, "Perhaps the most important lesson learned from this communication activism endeavor is that people with and without resources can work together to spark economic and social development, and, in the process, learn from and about one another" (p. 395).

**Building community through unity and fragmentation in a "reverse" soup kitchen.**

W. H. Papa et al. (2005) explored a dialectical tension that contributes to building community at Helping Hands (a pseudonym), an organization that offers shelter, food, and other services to people who are homeless in the Appalachian region of the United States. Focusing on the organization's community suppers—a family-style dinner collaborative created in the manner of "a soup kitchen in reverse" (W. H. Papa et al., 2005, p. 239), where people who are poor work together with other community members—these communication researchers sought to understand how an underlying dialectical tension of unity and fragmentation created and sustained community at Helping Hands.

W. H. Papa et al. (2005) first offered examples of how unity is created through communication during Helping Hands' community suppers, highlighting the blending of people who are poor or homeless with wealthier community members through coordinated action and

dialogue. They then described evidence of fragmentation during the suppers, including community members' feelings of connectedness at the dinners as contrasted to their relative loneliness at home, their disconnection from particular people who were present (e.g., wealthier college students) or particular rituals employed (e.g., praying) during the suppers, and the chosen isolation of, or even violence demonstrated by, some attendees.

W. H. Papa et al. (2005) concluded that concept of dialectical tensions is useful for exploring community in social justice settings, in that such tensions provide lenses to both instances of unity and instances of fragmentation, and, in doing so, "reflect the full meaning of what any vibrant community is" (p. 266). Although the researchers did not document particular CCPs that facilitate unity or fragmentation, their narratives provide insight into practices that accomplished those outcomes. For example, in a story about the director's use of a puppet to engage crowd members in a discussion of what they were thankful for, it is easy to extrapolate the beneficial (to some attendees) communicative practices of encouraging participation, using humor, and asking diners to share experiences of joy. Additionally, W. H. Papa et al.'s (2005) research identified a list of components of unity and fragmentation, which includes many broader categories of communicative practices that facilitate unity (e.g., recognition, defined boundary, and sharing suffering) and fragmentation (e.g., essentializing poverty, being subjected, and disidentification).

**Connecting residents through a comprehensive communication forum.** Schmitz et al. (1995) conducted a 6-year longitudinal study to observe the origins, operations, and consequences of the city of Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network (PEN), a free, government-sponsored, interactive, computer-based communication system that was designed by city officials to connect city residents together in a comprehensive communication forum. The

purposes of the PEN system included: “1) to provide greater access to public information, 2) to enhance residents’ communication with city officials, and 3) to establish forums for discussing public issues” (Schmitz et al., p. 27). Schmitz et al. explored how citizens used the PEN network to achieve various goals, documenting its outcomes and notable controversies surrounding its use.

What makes the PEN system of particular interest is that a significant portion of its users consisted of people who were homeless. To facilitate their access to the system, 20 public terminals were located around the city in public buildings, such as libraries, senior centers, and recreation facilities, and those on public terminals comprised 20% of PEN users. Users who were homeless and their activist-minded peers collaborated to persuade the Santa Monica City Council to fund a facility with showers, washers, and lockers (and, later, job skills training) for people who were homeless. Schmitz et al. (1995), adopting a symbolic-interactionist perspective to analyze this community collaboration, asserted that community can arise in this mediated way, and that “the shared meanings generated by these existent groups both constrain the range of options for and shape the meaning of new communication systems and users” (p. 41).

Schmitz et al. (1995) offered specific recommendations for improving the PEN system (e.g., about listserv moderation and finding a balance between the tension of desiring freedom of expression and enabling potentially abusive rhetoric). Although the researchers did not focus on CCPs within the large population studied (all PEN users in Santa Monica), other than general online participation practices (including PEN “flaming” and discussion practices), they documented important uses of and challenges to using a technology-based system of building community across class lines. Schmitz et al. concluded that “systems like PEN can bridge communication gaps between very dissimilar persons” who likely would not interact otherwise,

and, as such, “PEN has potential to empower persons who are not customarily given voice” (pp. 41, 42). Moreover, one of the authors of the study (Paschal) was homeless and used PEN to assist other people who are homeless in seeking employment, which makes this particular form of applied communication scholarship and intervention.

**Teaching communication competencies in a job training program.** Waldron et al. (2001; see also Waldron & Lavitt, 2000) conducted a yearlong investigation of a “welfare-to-work” job training program that taught communication competencies to people living in poverty in an urban area. In the same way that *StreetWise* eschews giving financial handouts and, instead, tackles problems of poverty by giving people who are homeless opportunities for employment, welfare-to-work programs are based on the premise that “the substitute for financial assistance is often a training program that emphasizes the development of communication skills” (Waldron et al., p. 16). This program was noted for its success by the job-training agency that provided it, in that approximately 60% of participants found jobs and held them for at least 90 days.

Waldron et al. (2001) documented communication competencies taught in the 2-week-long “life skills/career preparation” (p. 18) program that was studied, comparing those competencies to the K–12 communication standards issued by the National Communication Association, and identifying communication needs of participants that the program was not meeting. Waldron et al. found that most communication competencies (18 of the 20 studied) were successfully incorporated into the program’s curriculum, and, as such, “the development of communication skills is believed by the agency to be an important stop on the route to employment” (p. 26). Additionally, four unmet communication needs were identified:

development of postemployment social support skills, conflict management training, on-the-job communication competencies, and realistic employment expectations.

Although Waldron et al. (2001) identified and described competencies taught and needed, they did not explore whether those competencies actually were beneficial to participants in securing or maintaining jobs. As such, this study is of limited direct benefit to people living in poverty or to organizations working with those individuals. However, the study did show the need for communication competences as a key component of job-training programs for those living in poverty, and, consequently, as Waldron et al. concluded, “communication scholars are well-positioned to influence the current dialogue about welfare reform” (p. 28).

**Building community and self-sufficiency through communication technology.**

Pinkett and O’Bryant (2003) conducted an assessment of the Camfield Estates–MIT Creating Community Connections Project, designed as a model to build community, empowerment, and self-sufficiency within residents of the Camfield Estates low-income housing development in Roxbury, Massachusetts. The technology-based model uses an approach known as *asset-based community development* (ABCD), which “assumes that social and economic revitalization starts with what is already present in the community,” and aims to map and then mobilize the capacities of residents and of surrounding commercial and institutional organizations “to facilitate productive and meaningful connections” (Pinkett & O’Bryant, pp. 191, 192). To accomplish these goals, residents (with technical assistance from MIT researchers) first created a map of all businesses, organizations, and institutions that were less than two miles from Camfield Estates, as well as an inventory of residents’ formal and informal skills (e.g., plumbing, babysitting, and web design). Approximately one third of residents then participated in a series of workshops on “online educational, banking, shopping, government, and housing services . . . .

to acquire additional skills that enabled them to tap into information resources that were specific to their interests and needs” (p. 201). As a result of these interventions, participants strengthened and expanded their social ties, heightened their awareness of community resources, became more informed, and gained a number of technology-related benefits, such as increased internet use and more positive associations between civic engagement and the internet.

Pinkett and O’Bryant’s (2003) study represents another interesting way to build community and to help people empower themselves to become more self-sufficient through communication technology. As the Pinkett and O’Bryant explained, “What is essentially taking place at Camfield is a cultural shift, or reorientation toward community and technology as a result of the residents’ return to the renovated property and the associated infrastructure that has been set in place” (p. 205). However, as in Waldron et al.’s (2001) study, the Camfield Estate did not document whether residents’ increases in social ties and awareness of community resources actually benefited them in terms of fostering empowerment or self-sufficiency.

These six case studies are strong exemplars of communication programs enacted with and on behalf of people who live in poverty. Moreover, some of those studies focused on using communication (and CCPs, in particular) to build community among those living in poverty or with others who were not living in poverty, although community was not the central focus of these studies nor the primary means (e.g., the generative mechanism) for aiding people in their efforts to move themselves out of poverty.

The proposed study explores another communication-based program—although not necessarily described as such by the organization studied—that works both for and with people who live in poverty: the Boulder County Circles Campaign. The Boulder County Circles Campaign, however, is unique in that it uses CCPs to build community among members of a

diverse group, for the purpose of aiding some people in that group (those who are living in poverty) to build interpersonal relationships and resources to move out of poverty. Before examining that campaign and the specific site of this study (which are described in subsequent sections) the next section briefly examines the nature of community and its relationship with communication, especially within the context of promoting social change.

### **The Communicative Construction of Community**

Although CCPs are used by groups and organizations for many reasons and to accomplish various goals, they often are deliberately employed to promote community among members, because the creation and maintenance of community is assumed to assist individuals and groups to achieve many other important goals (e.g., coping with illness). This section first examines the concept of “community” and its relationship to communicative practices, setting the stage for the purpose of this study. This section is followed by a section that frames poverty as a problem of both communication and community.

### **Conceptualizing Community**

*Community* is a multidimensional concept, referring, often simultaneously, to (a) members of a specific place (e.g., *the* Boulder community) or a real and actively connected group of people (e.g., *a* retirement community); (b) a nonspecific, large universal/generalized group that identifies with, or is viewed by others as being identified with, a common characteristic (e.g., the homeless community or the gay community); or (c) an indication of intimacy or common interest in others where shared emotion or feeling is the bond (e.g., a supportive or tight-knit community). Underwood and Frey (2008) catalogued four conceptualizations of community in modern communication scholarship: community based on physical (e.g., as a site), support (e.g., as emotional aid), influence (e.g., as regulating social

order), and meaning-making attributes (e.g., common values). Elias (1974) explained that, generally, the use of the term “community” is “to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages,” but that, over time, the use of the word has evolved to give “structure priority over sentiment” (p. xiii), in that scholars now are as concerned with structural features of community (e.g., geographic attributes, demographic features, or virtual networks) as they are with feelings of connection experienced by its members. This dissertation project is interested in both the sentiment (i.e., people’s understanding and experience of community) and structure (i.e., CCPs used by the organization studied to build community) of community within a group of diverse individuals created for the purpose of building the social capital of those living in poverty, such that, eventually, they will progress out of poverty.

This study focuses, in particular, on the *communicative* construction of community. The relationship between communication and community is an intricate one that dates as far back as the beginnings of Western history (see J. W. Carey, 1989), a relationship that is based, according to Shepherd (2001), on the shared etymological basis for the two terms:

The word *communication* . . . arose from the Latin *munia*, meaning gifts or services. Communication, then, might be understood . . . as an activity of mutual giving and service. (The prefix, “co-” implies mutuality; the suffix, “-tion” denotes an act or process). . . . Community arises from the same Latin root of *munia*, where the reciprocal giving and mutual service that takes place in communication works to make a common people, or *communis*, a community which is bound together through gifts of service. . . . *Munia* (or communication) to the common group is required so that a community can be made and maintained. (p. 30)

A communication perspective on community foregrounds communication as the primary practice or process through which individuals connect to create and sustain the type of shared bonds that constitute a feeling of community among them. In some cases, scholars study the connection between communication and community in these conceptualizations from a *transmission perspective*, “exploring how communities use communication (albeit, sometimes unintentionally) as a tool to accomplish particular purposes,” whereas in other cases, researchers approach this connection from a *constitutive perspective*, to “focus on how communication creates—is constitutive of—community” (underwood & Frey, 2008, pp. 377, 378–379).

A transmission perspective views communication as a tool that is used to influence people’s behavior, a “conduit . . . by which information, as expressions of personal needs and desires and responses to needs and desires, is transferred between persons, namely, ‘information processes’” (Mokros & Deetz, 1996, p. 31). A transmission perspective seeks to use communication in ways that improve people, problems, things, or communities that already exist, by “provid[ing] labels to an already extant universe of objects, reasons, motives, and affections” (Mokros & Deetz, 1996, p. 31). For example, Good Gifts, the organization founded and studied by W. H. Papa et al. (2012) can be conceptualized as primarily using a transmission model, in that it employed communication strategies with people living in poverty (e.g., enacting scenarios designed to increase salespeople’s communication confidence) and with university students (e.g., learning about communication principles of social justice) to improve cross-class community building between the two groups of people. As another example of a study that can be explained through a transmission perspective of communication and community building, the Public Electronic Network, explored by Schmitz et al. (1995), used electronic communication to

transmit information across Santa Monica and to provide a forum where residents of that community could express ideas and discuss and debate public issues.

A constitutive perspective—also known as the ritual, cultural, or meaning-based perspective (see Underwood & Frey, 2008)—foregrounds communication as the principal social practice that builds community, as expressed in “terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ [and] ‘fellowship’” (J. W. Carey, 1989, p. 18). From such a perspective, community is not viewed as present prior to communication but, rather, “community . . . is best regarded as a phenomenon that emerges from communication” (Adelman & Frey, 1997, p. 5). Furthermore, in contrast to a transmission perspective, a constitutive perspective “sees the original role or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful, cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action” (J. W. Carey, 1989, p. 18). For example, *Helping Hands*, studied by W. H. Papa et al. (2005), had goals that were similar to *Good Gifts* of building cross-class community, but in this instance, the researchers used a constitutive perspective (as opposed to a transmission perspective) to examine communication and community building by documenting tensions of unity and fragmentation inherent to the collaborative construction of a shared experience. The research study conducted and described in this dissertation examines instances of how CCPs are framed in the organization studied through both transmission and constitutive perspectives, but given that this study explores how community is communicatively constructed through specific CCPs, a constitutive perspective is privileged (as opposed to, for example, focusing on how goals are communicatively accomplished in a preexisting community, which would be the focus of a transmission perspective).

Some communication scholars have used the constitutive perspective—either explicitly or implicitly—to explore how community emerges from CCPs in groups and organizations. For example, Ball-Rokeach et al. (2001) examined the constitutive construction of community belonging through storytelling, posing a model that explained how active storytelling among immigrants living in Los Angeles expanded their connections beyond attachment to physical place to include the newfound experience of belonging and attachment (support attributes, in Underwood and Frey's, 2008, category scheme) to neighborhood. Similarly, Albrechtslund (2010) also explored the role of storytelling as a key communicative practice of building community, focusing on the use of narratives in the *World of Warcraft* online gaming community. Albrechtslund's research foregrounded meaning-making attributes of community by exploring how both historical and fictional narratives about the group gaming experience helped members to construct collective identity and to create a sense of community. As another example, Lopez (2009) studied the “mommy blogger” phenomenon, focusing on support and influence attributes of community, by exploring how the practice of blogging helped mothers to create a forum to constitutively build community, and, through their discourse, challenged dominant representations of motherhood.

Some scholars have blended constitutive and transmission perspectives to study how CCPs are related to creating and sustaining community. As Underwood and Frey (2008) pointed out, “Although most authors do not overtly articulate their conception of communication in their research reports, some scholars explicitly explore how communication is both constitutive of community and simultaneously employed by a community as a tool” (p. 380). This blending of perspectives may be a more complete way to understand community-building processes, in that, as J. W. Carey (1989) explained:

Neither of these counterposed views of communication necessarily denies what the other affirms. A ritual [constitutive] view does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright except insofar as they are cast within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order. Similarly, even writers indissolubly wedded to the transmission view of communication must include some notion . . . to attest however tardily to the place of ritual action in social life. (pp. 21–22)

Novak and Harter's (2008) research on the Chicago *StreetWise* organization, explored earlier, can be conceptualized as employing both perspectives on communication and community building within the context of the problem of poverty. For example, from a transmission perspective, *StreetWise* seeks communication-based solutions to better integrate disenfranchised people living in poverty into the preexisting majority community (e.g., by using incentives to encourage them to attend community meetings). From a constitutive perspective, however, *StreetWise* seeks to change existing social constructions of what it means to be a community and what type of people are desirable community members (e.g., to include disenfranchised members, such as *StreetWise* newspaper vendors). As another example of this blending of perspectives, Adelman and Frey (1997) documented how CCPs at Bonaventure House, a residential facility for people living with AIDS, managed ongoing dialectical tensions of community life experienced by residents and staff (e.g., connection–disengagement), showing, for instance, how mandatory house meetings helped residents and staff to govern the community, and how communication rituals, such as a balloon ceremony, helped residents to create meaning about what constituted community and family within the house. As another example, Aden et al. (2009) studied how the performative enactment of rituals during football watching parties (e.g.,

singing team songs, wearing team colors, and enacting greeting rituals) helped to form and maintain a feeling of community among University of Nebraska football fans.

Studies that blend the transmission and constitutive perspectives reveal the complexity of the relationship between communication and community building. This blending of perspectives is particularly relevant for studies of poverty, in that blended perspectives weave together issues of both physical community (e.g., a particular neighborhood or organization) and experienced or symbolic community (e.g., social bonds), and incorporate social learning from top-down and bottom-up models (e.g., information transfer), as well from insider and outsider perspectives of identification (e.g., co-creating new social constructions). As such, although this study foregrounds communication and community building as a constitutive process, because of the tendency for the discourse of individuals, groups, and organizations to frame that relationship as a process of transmission, this work shows how community building in the organization studied is approached from both perspectives. In doing so, this study examines communication employed as both a tool to accomplish specific purposes or goals (e.g., educating participants how to become better listeners) that improve community relationships, and as a mode through which communities are socially constructed. This study, thus, extends the literature on the relationship between communication and community by examining how CCPs engaged in at one branch of the Boulder County Circles Campaign build community among a diverse group as they work together to aid some of the group members in their efforts to move themselves out of poverty.

Moreover, a discussion of communication and community would be remiss not to include the ideas of Robert Putnam (e.g., 1996, 2000, 2003), who asserted that Americans were increasingly absent from traditional institutions of community—churches, moose clubs, and even

bridge playing groups—and were decreasing their historic tendency to join organizations that promote trust and teamwork and, as Putnam argues, provide the social foundations for democracy in America. In response to these assertions of America's declining community, Circles represents an organization and a particular group of people who are dedicated to growing community, in that it represents a space where cross-class individuals can join together for the common purpose of helping to end poverty by building interpersonal relationships and collectively working on individual, group, and community-level goals.

### **Poverty as a Problem of Communication and Community**

Problems of communication, of course, are more than problems with words, and have implications far beyond what was said, talked about, or constructed through language. Accordingly, communication solutions have the power to solve real-world, practical problems. Consider, for example, how Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) described the response to and effects of the construction of a “children of poverty” label for economically disadvantaged students in relation to standardized test scores and school progress:

What happens when a category of student is constructed, through language, as a uniform group in need of improvement? . . . A category has been created, and along with it, a charge to change the members of that category. Schools look for help. Principals and superintendents ask their neighboring counterparts for advice. . . . An affordable program is identified, and its language begins to form ways of thinking for the teachers in their interactions with the children from the identified group. The program's language creates representations (Holquist, 1997; Mehan, 1993; Rabinow, 1986; Said, 1979), frames for thinking about “these kids.” Policy occasions conceptual and linguistic representations of people, and then it moves those linguistic representations into material

school buildings. What at first seems like so many words has real effects on human beings. (pp. 2498–2499)

As Bomer et al.'s example illustrates, language can be a powerful tool for creating or denying people's access to tangible or linguistic resources.

In many ways, the societal problem of poverty is a problem of communication and community,<sup>6</sup> in that when people living in poverty are excluded from the normative community discourse and disconnected from those who are not poor, they can become unable to communicatively construct or participate in the broader community and, as a result, they may not be able to connect to resources—social and material—that they need to survive and thrive. By focusing on this important social issue/problem, this study contributes to social justice communication scholarship by examining how new communicative practices can be employed to subvert dominant discourses or patterns of interaction that produce and reproduce injustice (Frey et al., 1996), and how communication can be understood as a process whereby marginalized and disenfranchised individuals can engage with and participate in communities that they have helped to create. The next section describes the site of this study: the Longmont Group of the Boulder County Circles Campaign, and explains why it was chosen as a location to explore the problem of poverty in relation to communication and community building.

#### **Site: The Longmont Group of the Boulder County Circles Campaign**

The Boulder County Circles Campaign is a Boulder County government-sponsored nonprofit program designed to aid people living in poverty in building new cross-class interpersonal relationships and social and material resources, for the eventual purpose of progressing out of poverty. The campaign operates in Boulder County in three locations: Longmont, Lafayette, and Boulder. At each location, an autonomous group comprised of both

individuals desiring to move out of poverty and volunteers not living in poverty meet weekly to build interpersonal relationships and work on issues related to poverty and self-sufficiency. The three locations remain independent, but they do share staff members and a sponsoring organization—the Boulder County government’s Community Action Programs—that focuses on advocacy and community organizing related to low-income issues.

This research study explores the Longmont site (Longmont Circles) of the Boulder County Circles Campaign. This section explains the mission of, and process employed by, Longmont Circles; describes two contexts where CCPs are cultivated and practiced at Longmont Circles; and concludes with three reasons why Longmont Circles was chosen as the site for this study.

### **Mission and Practices of the Boulder County Circles Campaign**

The Boulder County Circles Campaign is the local franchise of the national Circles Campaign (Circles), a unique, community-based and volunteer-driven approach to aiding people in their attempts to move out of poverty. Circles works with people living in *generational poverty*, a term describing individuals who live in poverty and whose family members have lived in poverty for two generations or longer (e.g., a person living in poverty whose parents and grandparents also live or lived in poverty).

According to the recently created (March, 2011) mission statement of this organization, “The Boulder County Circles Campaign is a community ending poverty one family at a time” (Marco, personal communication, March 3, 2011). As the Circles manual explained, “Strategies that will end poverty are radically different from strategies that simply address poverty” (S. C. Miller, Clark, Atcher, & Move the Mountain Leadership Center, 2010, p. 204), and as such, Circles uses a rare approach to ending poverty. Whereas most programs for people living in

poverty provide aid in the form of immediate financial or material support (e.g., food banks, emergency shelters, and many federal human services aid programs, such as the Section 8 housing voucher program or TANF), Circles, instead, facilitates the development of long-term social capital by building community among participants.

*Social capital* has been defined as connections between people, the aggregate of resources that arise from those connections, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that follow (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1983, 1984; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000). According to Field (2003), the central thesis of social capital theory can be summed up as “relationships matter” (p. 1), which Putnam (2000) posed as central to the success of both individuals and communities. As Putnam (2000) contended, “Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measureable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference to our lives” (pp. 288–289).

The Circles program begins with the notion that people living in generational poverty have less social capital and opportunity to develop it than do people from middle- or upper class backgrounds. Furthermore, the found of Circles, S. C. Miller (2008), asserted that close interpersonal relationships between people from significantly different socioeconomic classes rarely are built without “strong intention,” and that to change, people “must get intentional about building in-depth relationships with those having very different income levels” (p. 27). Thus, Circles seeks to build social capital by creating networks (called “circles”) between people of diverse economic and social class. What is different about Circles, as compared to most other programs designed to help people move out of poverty, is that these networks are created between people living in poverty and volunteer community members not living in poverty, rather than with paid professional poverty advocates (e.g., social services providers or case workers).

As such, the Boulder County Circles Campaign believes that “middle-class family can be an extremely effective Ally for a family in poverty, creating a support network that can help them finally break past the barriers that have been holding them back” and that links together these middle-class volunteers and impoverished participants in “circles” (Wollerman, 2010, para. 15).

Each “circle” includes a person working to get out of generational poverty (called a “Circle Leader” or simply “Leader”) and between two and four community volunteers (called “Allies”) who are willing to befriend the Leader and his or her family for at least 18 months. Circle Leaders commit to: completing both the Circle orientation program and the Getting Ahead curriculum, staying with Circles for at least 18 months, attending all weekly community dinner meetings and monthly circle meetings, giving back to Circles initiative through creative acts of reciprocity, and making progress on the goals they have identified. In turn, Allies agree to attend all monthly circle meetings and at least one weekly Community dinner meeting a month, being in contact with Leaders by phone or in person as needed, staying with Circles for at least 18 months, and also make a commitment to:

1. Build an intentional friendship that is friendly, safe, and supportive with a family in poverty (Circle Leader family) and join them in their quest to increase their resources.
2. Be willing to look at your own hidden rules and how they affect your relationships with people from different economic backgrounds.
3. Use the experience of friendship with a family in poverty to advocate within the community for changes in the systems barriers that keep poverty in place. (S. C. Miller, et al., 2010, p. 134)

Each circle sets goals that are unique to its members’ particular needs and circumstances, and that are intended to lead toward Circle Leader self-sufficiency. Additionally, a major focus is

placed on “expanding social networks and enhancing academic performance of both children and parents” (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 5). To aid Leaders in their efforts to move out of poverty, and to facilitate the development of high-quality interpersonal relationships between Leaders and Allies, Circles encourages participants to engage in specific strategies and CCPs, which will be explored in the next section.

### **Communicative Strategies and CCPs Employed by Longmont Circles**

As explained above, the goal of the Boulder County Circles Campaign, quite simply, is “ending poverty, in our nation, in our lifetime” by “developing [Leaders’] social capital . . . in support of long-term empowerment and self-sufficiency” (Boulder County Circles Campaign, 2010, para. 2, 3). Although Circles does not specify what it means to be self-sufficient, the U.S. federal government defines the *self-sufficiency standard* as having enough income to meet basic minimum needs (including housing, food, child care, transportation, health care, clothing, telephone, and taxes) from month to month without the assistance of a subsidy (Center for Women’s Welfare, 2012). In lieu of creating a self-sufficiency standard, the Circles manual documented the “primary results sought” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 133) for Leaders as household income, assets (particularly savings), debt, credit, health insurance for everyone in the house, and enough food and affordable housing.

Although many organizations attempting to end poverty share these same goals, the use of CCPs by Longmont Circles and its focus on building community make it unique. Other programs typically focus on offering linear processes of information transfer (e.g., teaching people about job options) or giving them material or financial aid (e.g., providing food) to alleviate the effects of poverty (e.g., lack of food) or to solve problems that may contribute to people’s inability to move out of poverty (e.g., lack of job skills). In contrast, Longmont Circles

uses CCPs (e.g., social support, relationship-oriented communication, and positive framing of mundane life events with the “New and Good” activity, as described below) to constitutively build interpersonal relationships and social capital as resources to enable people to move out of poverty. S. C. Miller (2008) claimed that “although the process of helping a family out of poverty is complex, the concept of Circles is not, making it attractive for many” (p. 6).

The national Circles program outlines five broad strategies employed by Circles, which are collectively framed as the generative mechanism of Circles. When used as part of the Circles program, these strategies can “achiev[e]” a “situation in a community” where families “become part of a community of people with different socioeconomic backgrounds who have learned to care about one another” and can work towards finding a way out of poverty (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 13). These five strategies include:

1. *Defining a common vision* of ending poverty for everyone to work toward.
2. *Defining a common language* to discuss similarities and differences. (Use aha! Process, Inc. books: *Bridges out of Poverty* for Allies and *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World* for Leaders)
3. *Defining a shared set of values* and principles to guide the healthy development of the community.
4. *Establishing an atmosphere of permission to use common sense*, so that people feel free to do whatever is most appropriate to solve particular problems and reach defined goals.
5. *Holding regularly scheduled meetings* to share and learn together. Weekly meetings [called Circles community dinners at Longmont Circles] of Circle Leaders include a free meal and childcare to make it easier to attend. (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 13)

Many of these strategies link to concepts with a long history in the communication discipline. For example, the notion of a common vision resonates with communication scholars, including group and organizational communication scholars (e.g., those who employ symbolic convergence theory). Additionally, many of these strategies are enacted through the intentional use of CCPs. As explained below, these CCPs are employed in at least two contexts: during training programs (of both Allies and Leaders) and at Circles community dinners.

**Training programs.** Training at Longmont Circles functions as an experiential, educational process of teaching prospective participants the values, language, and foundation of the Circles program. Training also engages participants, often for the first time, in many of the CCPs of Circles, such as using listening pairs or the practice of starting each meeting with “New and Good,” which was explained by S. C. Miller et al. (2010):

Most Circles events begin with an opportunity to go around the circle with every person sharing their name, where they are from, and something that is “New and Good.” Our culture as a whole tends to focus on problems and what is not going well. People struggling with poverty are accustomed to being treated as if they are “cases” with lots of problems and most of their contact with social service providers focuses on discussing problems. Thus, New and Good is a way to celebrate the good in one another’s lives and it is a way to practice being in charge of where we put our attention. It also gives Allies an opportunity to introduce themselves that focuses on the personal instead of job titles and affiliations, which can emphasize class differences. (p. 138)

Through these training programs, “Leaders and their Allies will have a common understanding of poverty, the hidden rules of class, resources, and the causes of poverty” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 108). Additionally, S. C. Miller et al. (2010) asserted that such training will help

participants to “build relationships of mutual respect as they take on the problems of poverty at the individual and community level” (p. 108).

***Training programs for Leaders.*** For Leaders in Boulder County, training begins long before Circles’ events officially begin, when they graduate from a program called “Getting Ahead,” which involves 15 weeks of workshops where people living in poverty explore economic class issues and structural barriers that make it difficult to escape generational poverty, set personal goals, and come up with ways to achieve those goals to eventually move themselves out of poverty. Getting Ahead is a curriculum based on Aha! Process, Inc. (founded by Ruby Payne) books, including *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World: Building Your Resources for a Better Life* (DeVol, 2004). As Leader Thomas (a pseudonym<sup>7</sup>) explained:

In Getting Ahead [curriculum], you learn that [poverty] isn’t just about income, it’s about you. You learn about 13 identifiable resources: emotional maturity, financial resources, spiritual conviction, mental stability, and so on. Using these things, we were able to very realistically chart ourselves as a reality-based look at where we were in our resource access. We learned that if we could improve our perspectives, and then if we could improve our resources, we could kick poverty right on its tail end.

A large part of the Getting Ahead curriculum is based on learning about “hidden rules” of economic class, a concept developed by Payne (1996) and appropriated by the national Circles organization. *Hidden rules* describe “the unspoken cues and habits of a group” (e.g., in views about money, food, time, or humor) that manifest differently among “economic classes” (Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2006, p. 39), “ethnic groups, and other units of people” (Payne, 1996, p. 9). Payne related these rules to poverty by explaining:

Three hidden rules in poverty are the following: The noise level is high (the TV is always on and everyone may talk at once), the most important information is non-verbal, and one of the main values of an individual to the group is an ability to entertain. (p. 9)

The Getting Ahead training curriculum draws on these hidden rules to describe differences in hidden rules among “poverty,” “middle class,” and “wealth” (Payne et al., 2006; see Table 2). Moreover, Payne’s influence on Circles is important, and will be further discussed in later sections of this chapter.

S. C. Miller et al. (2010) explained that these hidden rules are important because “understanding the hidden rules of the middle and upper classes, and choosing to use them can open doors to new relationships, new jobs, and higher resources” for participants of Getting Ahead (p. 107). Using the information learned about economic class, community resources, and hidden rules, participants in the Getting Ahead curriculum (called “Investigators” prior to becoming Circle Leaders) develop “new future stories”; plans to build their emotional, financial, and social resources; and develop “mental model[s] of community prosperity” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 107) in preparation for becoming Circle Leaders.

Leaders also take pre-Circles training, where they are “trained and supported to lead the group, as well as to ask Allies for specific help with specific needs” (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 11), such as helping to write resumes, engaging in practice job interviews, and finding donated cars and computers. Both the Getting Ahead curriculum and the Boulder County Circles Campaign are part of the broader “Generating Opportunities” framework<sup>8</sup> adopted by Boulder County in 2008, which represents one part of the Boulder County poverty initiative (which also includes a sustainable wage job pipeline, a housing crisis fund, and a low-income families transportation initiative, among many other programs).

Table 2

*Hidden Rules among Classes (from Payne et al, 2006, pp. 44–45)*

	<b>POVERTY</b>	<b>MIDDLE CLASS</b>	<b>WEALTH</b>
<b>POSSESSIONS</b>	People.	Things.	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees.
<b>MONEY</b>	To be used, spent.	To be managed.	To be conserved, invested.
<b>PERSONALITY</b>	Is for entertainment. Sense of humor is highly valued.	Is for acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	Is for connections. Financial, political, social connections are highly valued.
<b>FOOD</b>	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality important.	Key question: Was it presented well? Presentation important.
<b>CLOTHING</b>	Clothing valued for individual style and expression of personality.	Clothing valued for its quality and acceptance into norm of middle class. Label important.	Clothing valued for its artistic sense and expression. Designer important.
<b>TIME</b>	Present is most important. Decisions made for moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important. Decisions made partially on basis of tradition and decorum.
<b>EDUCATION</b>	Valued and revered as abstract but not as reality.	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition to making and maintaining connections.
<b>DESTINY</b>	Believes in fate. Cannot do much to mitigate change.	Believes in choice. Can change future with good choices now.	Noblesse oblige.
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about networking.
<b>FAMILY STRUCTURE</b>	Tends to be matriarchal.	Tends to be patriarchal.	Depends on who has the money.
<b>WORLD VIEW</b>	Sees world in terms of local setting.	Sees world in terms of national setting.	Sees world in terms of international view.
<b>LOVE</b>	Love and acceptance conditional, based on whether individual is liked.	Love and acceptance conditional, based largely upon achievement.	Love and acceptance conditional and related to social standing and connections.
<b>DRIVING FORCES</b>	Survival, relationships, entertainment.	Work, achievement.	Financial, political, social connections.
<b>HUMOR</b>	About people and sex.	About situations.	About social faux pas.

*Training programs for Allies.* Allies also go through extensive training before beginning any Boulder County Circles Campaign programs, and they receive ongoing training and support during their involvement in the program. Prior to becoming an Ally, volunteers take three training courses to “have the preparation, mental framework, and support to assist them to develop and maintain relationships across class lines” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 120).

First, volunteers complete a 6-hour Bridges Out of Poverty course that educates them about what is like to live in poverty and about the hidden rules (also taught to Leaders in the Getting Ahead curriculum) that people living in poverty must learn to function effectively in “a middle-class world” (Payne, 1996, p. 173), and that provides a framework for building interpersonal relationships across class lines. The concepts of hidden rules and mental models of poverty, as well as other frameworks on poverty that stem from the perspective of Ruby Payne (explained in more detail in a subsequent section), are taught to potential Allies as a tool to build cross-class interpersonal relationships. As S. C. Miller (2008) explained, “For individuals who have been raised in different socioeconomic circumstances to build effective relationships, it’s very helpful to be able to use ‘mental models’ as guides” (p. 7).

Second, Allies complete a 2-hour Allies 101 course, which inculcates specific rules of, and practices employed by, the Boulder County Circles Campaign programs. Third, Allies participate in a 2-hour match meeting, which prepares them for being matched into a circle with a Leader and other Allies. Collectively, Ally training:

- 1) provides information that allows potential Allies to determine if the role is a right fit for them,
- 2) prepares the person for the roles and responsibilities of an Ally,

3) creates “aha moments” that increase the Ally’s awareness of their own biases and barriers to building relationships across class lines, and,

4) builds relationships with Circles staff. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 120)

**Circles Community dinners.** Circles community dinners are 2-hour weekly gatherings where everyone involved in Longmont Circles is invited to a family-style dinner, relaxed conversation, and activities and presentations aimed at building community connection. Allies are expected to attend at least one dinner each month, and Leaders commit to attending at least three dinners each month. These community dinners are framed by Longmont Circles staff as opportunities to “practice being together as part of the community” (Liza, personal communication, September 30, 2009), where Leaders and their Allies “seek solutions for the daily problems, large and small, faced by those wanting to get out of poverty” (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 5). On the last weekend of each month, a “Big View community dinner” is held that is open to the public, with participants discussing possible solutions to systemic problems in the local community that make it difficult for people to move out of poverty (i.e., developing a microlending program).

Similar to the training process, those who participate in community dinners engage in a number of CCPs designed to build community and to provide opportunities for them to empower themselves to tackle issues of poverty in their lives and in the lives of others. Some CCPs encourage self-disclosure, such as listening pairs or small group discussions, where participants answer questions such as:

When have you experienced oppression or powerlessness?

What was it like for you?

Think of a time when you have needed help and received it. What was helpful about how you received the assistance and what was unhelpful about the experience? (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 69)

Self-disclosure also is encouraged through the sharing of narratives of past experiences and by creating and sharing drawings that represent participants' future goals.

Other CCPs are designed to build reciprocity in the group, and "one of the important ways to do this is to provide people with a structured opportunity to contribute to the meeting going well" (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 149), such as setting up tables and food, greeting participants as they enter, cleaning up, and introducing New and Good, all of which are distributed among group members each week via a sign-up sheet. Additionally, every dinner starts with New and Good (explained above) and ends with Appreciations, during which

the process is to go around the room and have each person say one thing they appreciated that evening about the person to their left or right, one at a time and aloud so that each person in the room both receives and gives an appreciation. The receiver of the appreciation simply says, "thank you." (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 155)

According to the Circles manual (S. C. Miller et al., 2010), the Appreciations exercise is designed to create "a ritual that builds community," contribute "to the Circles focus on the positive," reduce potential conflict "by creating a culture of generosity" (p. 155), and "develop a practice of gratitude, peer relationship building, trust, and reciprocity" (p. 67).

Longmont Circles uses these CCPs, along with many others, to build community, develop cross-class interpersonal relationships, and facilitate access to resources, with the overarching goal of aiding people in poverty in their efforts to empower themselves to move toward self-sufficiency. Thus, through these training programs and community dinners that

employ CCPs, Longmont Circles lays a foundation for the development of community and social capital within an economically diverse group. Accordingly, this research study documents CCPs employed by Longmont Circles—including those outlined by Circles, as well as others that may arise during my research observations and participation—and how they are framed by Longmont Circles staff (e.g., from a constitutive or a transmission perspective of communication and community building), to assess the effects of those CCPs on participants' beliefs, attitudes, skills, feelings of empowerment, interpersonal relationships and sense of community, behaviors, goals and motivations, and ability to move out of poverty.

### **Two Concepts Embedded in Circles' Ideology: Social Class and Payne's Framework of Poverty**

The Circles program represents a unique way of attempting to end poverty, which arises out of its particular perspective on poverty as a social problem. As mentioned previously, both Ally and Leader training, including the Getting Ahead course that Leaders complete prior to starting the Circles program, in large measure, are based on the “hidden rules” of economic/social class concept and other frameworks designed by Ruby Payne (see, e.g., Payne, 1996; Payne et al., 2006) that have been appropriated by the national Circles organization. Because class is an important focus of Circles,<sup>9</sup> and because the influence of Payne's framework of poverty is apparent on the philosophy of Circles, and subsequently in the processes (e.g., training program, CCPs) that Circles uses to socialize participants to that philosophy, it is important to explain these two concepts in more detail. The next section first briefly reviews the concept of class and then explores Payne's framework in more detail, including discussing how her framework has been received by other researchers studying poverty.

**Social class and Circles.** Social class describes a variety of things, for as Hout (2008) asserted, “we can think of class as how people earn their money, how much money they have, or what they do with their money” (p. 26), and it is expressed through a variety of terms, including, as Hodge (2008) documented, rich, poor, white trash, ghetto, snob, yuppie, blue collar, redneck, WASP, low-rent, upscale, homeboy, bum, preppy, cultured, gangsta, and classy. In fact, the word “class” is derived from the Roman *classis*, which was a term that described the social divisions on which taxation systems were based (Rosenblum & Travis, 2008). The common usage of the term class, however, has moved away from its taxation roots and “consistently has been based on social stratification—the ranking of groups according to various criteria, with higher positions afforded more value, respect, status, and privilege than lower positions” (Allen, 2011, p. 95).

Social class is important, for as Allen (2011) asserted, it “embodies a powerful, persistent predictor of accessibility to resources, potential for longevity and success, and self-esteem” (p. 98). As such, class has been a topic broadly explored by academics, albeit often from inconsistent and conflicting frameworks. Some scholars (e.g., Dougherty, 2011; Wright, 2008) have documented the breadth and diversity of literature on social class, and many (e.g., Artz & Murphy, 2000; Ellis, 1999; Lareau, 2008) have acknowledged the complexity of this literature. Ellis (1999) called the subject of class “confused and obscure” (p. 175), and Lareau (2008) asserted that “the state of empirical research on social class . . . is turbulent, chaotic, conflicted, and broken into a number of sub-areas where researchers have very different methodological approaches” (p. 15). As Dougherty (2011) explained:

In some ways the material [on class] is so different that it does not seem like the authors are even talking about the same subject. More importantly, the literature seems to fall

short of addressing the deep dividing lines and lived experience of social class in the United States. (p. 49)

Moreover, for “contemporary communication” scholars, in particular, “the concept of class has been frequently rejected, avoided, or ignored” (Artz & Murphy, 2000, p. 215). To organize this complex body of scholarship, Dougherty (2011) divided the literature on social class into three definition-based themes (and acknowledged that there is some overlap between the categories): literature that defines social class as a variable, as culture, and as social structure. Each of these three themes is briefly explained below.

***Defining social class as sociological variables.*** First, some scholars believe that social class should be defined rather narrowly by a limited number of sociological variables (e.g., income, education, and job type). For example, this view might assert that individuals who represent the middle class make approximately \$32,500 to \$60,000 a year in annual personal income, work full time at a job with benefits, and hold a college degree. This variable-based categorization is consistent with how many organizations designed to aid people living in poverty divide and categorize classes of people (e.g., some U.S. government programs that are offered to people below a certain income level).

Although this variable-based approach may be appealing for its relative simplicity, it fails to capture how these variables function in people’s lives. Hence, Conley (2008), a scholar who disagrees with this view, asserted that these measures do not accurately depict social class, arguing that evidence-based studies of these variables show limited and inconsistent effects on social class.

Consider, for example, Leader Paula from the Boulder County Circles program. When I first met Paula, as a fellow member of an early Circles planning committee, I did not know

whether she was an Ally or a Circle Leader, and I did not give the matter much thought. On my way to a Circles meeting, I rode in a carpool that picked Paula up at her house, which was a large, two-story structure in what appeared to be an upscale neighborhood, and my ideas about Paula's class background began to take shape. During the meeting, Paula occasionally mentioned her college days and volunteer work, and told stories about traveling across the United States. Knitting together the available sociological variables—large house, college education, volunteer experiences, and leisure travel, things that I associated with middle- or upper class values—I incorrectly assumed that Paula was an Ally and that she did not live in poverty, but I was wrong.

As Paula's story unfolded, I realized that her house was subsidized by the government, that her volunteer experiences often were taken when no other job opportunities were available, and that what had sounded like cross-country adventures actually were unwanted, but financially necessary, relocations. As Paula described, "I . . . work two jobs a lot of the time, yet I have no health benefits, I live in Public Housing, and my family receives Food Stamps." Paula described her educational background as:

When I was in high school, I excelled at academics. Although I was poor and living with relatives in foster care, I was told I could go to college and "make something of myself." Through many thousands of dollars in student loans and working full time at the Student Union, I did go to college and graduated with a double Bachelors of Science degree. I thought that was it, my ticket to success. I was wrong!

Even with her degree, Paula struggled to find a job, working in retail positions and later, after the birth of her first child, at the factory where her mother worked. As she explained, "It was by no

means a cushy job. The pay was low, there were frequent shutdowns and layoffs and we still weren't making ends meet.”

Over the next few years, her husband's degenerative disability made living in cold New England painful; consequently, Paula and her family (now including a son) moved to Colorado, where they stayed in friends' basements and on couches until they secured government-funded housing. She currently works as an intern and hopes to secure a fulltime position. As she explained:

I have only been able to find temporary or seasonal work. I keep hearing what a wonderful employee I am and how they would love to keep me on, if only they had the funding. I keep hoping with each new temporary job that maybe things will work out and I will be able to stay. To have medical insurance, vacation days, and just the security of knowing the paychecks will keep coming would make an enormous difference in our lives.

As her story illustrates, despite excelling in high school, graduating from college, and being gainfully employed, Paula continues to struggle financially, working long hours for low wages and depending on federal aid to provide necessities, such as food and housing, for her family. Thus, traditional variables (e.g., education and employment status) used to define and divide people in this perspective are not particularly useful in capturing the lived experience of Paula's social class.

Paula's story represents just one example of the difficulty of defining social class through a variable approach. As Conley (2008) noted:

When sociologists and other academics debate the difference between class and status, between relational and gradational notions of class, and in how best to measure it, they

are, in essence, trying to sweep dust or sand into neat little piles. They can make these epistemological molehills, but what good are they? Dust bunnies soon blow across the landscape, and piles of dirt have little power when we push on them to explain things. (p. 367)

Moreover, Zweig (2004) asserted that conventional variable representations of class, such as income, wealth, education, and occupation, have become more difficult to detect. As such, although these variables undoubtedly affect social class in significant and important ways, and although people frequently use these variables to make assumptions—whether correct or incorrect—about others' social class, they do not fully portray the everyday enactment of social class.

*Defining social class as culture.* Second, other scholars assert that social class should be defined as a culture, in that the socioeconomic conditions into which people are socialized affect how they live, experience, and understand their lifeworld and the interactions within it. Although “class as culture” scholars draw from the same set of individual measures as do “class as variables” scholars, the former are interested, instead, in how class is socialized and relationally experienced, enacted, and maintained, and how class mobility can be achieved.

Scholars continue to debate the particular structures and systems by which individuals are socialized. For example, Bourdieu (1984) examined socialization broadly, documenting how cultural knowledge is produced and reproduced from society at large, whereas Lareau (2003, 2008) identified particular institutions of socialization, such as the family.

Bourdieu (1983, 1984), in particular, a historically important scholar who studies social class, examined class through a capital metaphor, asserting that different types of capital produce and reproduce class, in that these types of capital can be possessed and used by individuals to

achieve upward class mobility. Bourdieu identified four types of capital—(a) economic (e.g., money, financial resources, and material possessions), (b) social (e.g., relationships, social networks, and group membership), (c) cultural (e.g., knowledge, language, education, skills, and traditions), and (d) symbolic (e.g., honor and recognition)—and used the term *habitus* to describe the particular lifestyles and socializations that predisposed some classes to having an abundance of certain types of capital whereas other classes had less. Capital is transferred from one generation to the next through cultural and social reproduction mechanisms, many of which were documented and analyzed by Bourdieu (with families and educational systems being the most important, see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). These ideas (e.g., capital, habitus, and social reproduction) relate to poverty in that young people who are raised in upper class families inherit substantially different capital than do young people raised in poor families; perhaps more important, the capital held by individuals from upper classes are more likely to maintain these individuals' wealth and relative status than are the types of capital held by people living in poverty.

For example, Allen (2011) offered the following example from her life that exemplifies this cultural view of class:

When I won an all-expenses-paid scholarship for college, I could have gone to any college in the world that admitted me because I had earned access to economic capital to pay tuition, room, board, and travel costs. Because I was clueless about how to select a school, I picked the one that another black female student (who had won the same scholarship two years earlier) had chosen. I was not savvy about the college selection process . . . In essence, because I was a member of a poor family whose members had never gone to college, I had not gained the appropriate cultural or social capital to

navigate the college admission process. Fortunately, I did acquire an important bit of cultural capital because I was tracked according to intelligence and placed in classes with middle- to upper-class white students who knew the ropes of getting into college. . . . My experiences and Bourdieu's perspective on class reveal "linguistic, social and communication processes that foster class membership and consciousness" [Ellis, 1999, p. 195]. (pp. 95–96)

As Allen's example illustrates, knowledge of how to obtain higher education is a form of capital, and it often is held disproportionately by people from middle- and upper class families.

One potential negative effect of applying this theme to the study of social class is that it can promote a vision of class that privileges upper class lifestyles and, consequently, frames lower class lifestyles negatively. Additionally, some scholars who study class as culture (e.g., Bourdieu and Lareau) have been criticized (see, e.g., Dougherty, 2011) for placing too much value on upward mobility; in some cases, framing mobility as the primary ambition of those who are not considered part of the upper class. Furthermore, Dougherty critiqued this view for not adequately incorporating the influence of society:

Social class is not just about the culture of the people living in their material environment. It is also about the behavior and judgments of the people in the surrounding environment. It is the way that different classes hoard resources or create boundaries for those considered low class or the wrong sort (Pattillo, 2008). We blame people for their own poverty and, thanks to the media, assume that people who we perceive to be poor are criminals (Suarez, 2008). Although culture certainly plays a role in the maintenance of social class, it would be premature to end the discussion here. (p. 57)

As such, although framing class as culture is useful for understanding how social class can be passed down through generations or expressed in different ways by various groups, there are some problems with employing this lens.

*Defining social class as social structure.* Third, other scholars define social class as social structure, focusing on implicit (e.g., hidden rules) and explicit (e.g., laws) normative ways of behaving that provide opportunities and advantages for the in-the-know majority (upper and middle-class populations), and, simultaneously, disadvantage marginalized populations (working- or lower class populations). Scholars employing this framework seek to identify particular structures that affect social class, commonly agreeing on three dominant influences: gender, race, and relationship to production (e.g., capitalism).

Some scholars (e.g., Hays, 2003; Johnson, 2002; Skeggs, 1997) have explored how social class is structured by gender. For example, women's social class can be intertwined with gendered factors, such as men's work, which can maintain the hegemonic dominance of men (see, e.g., Brenner & Laslett, 1996; Mumby, 1998). Women's social class, compared to that of men, also can be tied more directly to needs of children or their families (see, e.g., McCall, 2008). In general, these scholars assert that women's social class is structured differently from men's social class.

Social class also is structured by race, as some scholars have documented (see, e.g., Fletcher, 2004; Lustig, 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993). For example, Gorski (2008a) asserted that race historically has been linked to problems of social class, in the United States, citing "housing discrimination, racial resegregation of schools, slavery, [and] Jim Crow" as examples of "how racism has been used to maintain an economic and political status quo" (p. 141). MacLeod (2009) explained how these ideologies permeate many U.S. Americans' understanding

of poverty, leading them to attribute poverty to individual (e.g., the educational and moral deficiencies of people living in poverty) rather than structural causes (e.g., social and economic failings):

To much of the American public . . . the state of the ghetto signifies not the gross inadequacy of the welfare state but its overgenerosity to a black underclass that is morally dissolute, culturally deprived, and socially undeserving. The underclass has been twisted into a racial rather than class formation, and poverty has become a black issue. (p. 243)

Other scholars have focused on race and class as marginalizing factors in relation to education (see, e.g., Anyon, 2005; Lareau, 2003; McCarthy, 1990). Race undoubtedly is an important factor in understanding social class, but because the Longmont Circles population is relatively homogeneous, race does not represent a strong marginalizing factor in this particular study.

Finally, social class is structured by people's relationship to production, in that people who share a common orientation to production also share a social class (see, e.g., Artz & Murphy, 2000). As Dougherty (2011) explained:

Those who own capital are part of the capitalist class. These are the controlling elite who profit most from capitalism. Those who use their bodies to actually produce a product are part of the working class. These people are said to own only their own labor. The managerial class is a newer invention. Because they neither own the capital nor do they actually labor to produce a product, the managerial class is said to own a type of knowledge that connects the other two classes. (p. 58)

Marx (1977) believed that because workers are paid low wages to produce goods and then alienated from the products of their labor (and often forced to buy those products back at market price), workers are subordinated and exploited by members of the capitalist class. Marx believed

that the only way out of this system of oppression was for workers to revolt and emancipate themselves (and, ideally, achieve social transformation via new relationships to production, through communism).

Although Marx's (1977) vision of communism never blossomed to produce the classless society that he (and many others) envisioned, his influence made an undeniably important and lasting impression on theories of social class. Hence, through this lens, scholars are encouraged to pay significant attention to ways in which capitalism and other systems of production produce and reproduce social disparities (see, e.g., Clegg, 1989). In sum, "class as social structure" scholars assert that to truly understand class, scholars must examine how it is influenced by social structures, including the oppressive structures (e.g., racism, sexism, and ageism) that can limit some people's access to educational, political, and economic resources.

**Social class at Longmont Circles and as a term used in this study.** Regardless of the framework employed, social class represents a complex system with wide-reaching effects on U.S. society. Many scholars have acknowledged this complexity, including Tyler (2010), who asserted that "class remains contested today more than ever, given a changing demographic landscape and limited vocabularies and opportunities to discuss classed social dynamics" (p. 394). Other scholars have documented how U.S. Americans are reluctant to talk about class; for example, Ellis (1999) labeled class "American's dirty little secret," and asserted, "you can infuriate people and make them squirm in discomfort by even mentioning the topic of social classes" (p. 175).

However, as academics struggle to further understand and explain class, and as some U.S. Americans shy away from discussing class, for participants in the Circles program, class is a normal part of Ally–Leader interactions. For Circles participants, class is both materially real

and socially and communicatively constructed. For example, Leaders talked about being constrained by a lack of disposable income and by constructions of class, both from other people (e.g., others' perceptions of how people living in poverty act) and constructions of class differences that Leaders perceived (e.g., Leaders reported feeling anxiety that they were "not middle class," which, in the case of at least two Leaders, held them back from pursuing success at their jobs).

Furthermore, what is particularly interesting about class in relation to the Circles program is that class labels are provided by Circles, which (as explained earlier in this chapter) divides participants into the two groups of Allies, who are identified as middle class, and Leaders, who are identified as living in poverty. This class identity is reinforced in Circles' training (e.g., in discussing hidden rules of social class) and often is made explicit during Circles' meetings (e.g., when participants are asked to divide into their respective groups or to wear nametags that label them as Allies or Leaders). Additionally, class identity is embodied and articulated by Longmont Circles' participants in many ways, such as: Leader Carla, who said, "I'm a Leader, so, you know, I wasn't raised to be middle class or anything;" Ally Kimberly, who said, "As an Ally, I didn't have to deal with the problems related to poverty that the Leaders often struggle with;" and by Ally Josephine, who said that Leaders and Allies "come from different classes, but we have found creative ways to meet in the middle."

Hence, when referring to class and cross-class interactions throughout this study, I am referencing Leaders and Allies, and interactions between members of those two groups, to the extent that participants identify with these groups and are identified by others as belonging to those particular categories. Although I recognize that these class divisions may be inaccurate (e.g., in that they reinforce false or incomplete distinctions between groups) or artificial (e.g., in

that they link class solely to income variables), these labels are used frequently by both the organization and the participants studied. As such, in using these terms, I preserve the many ways that participants experienced and conceptualized class and difference, and I capture the importance of the interactions that occurred and the community that was built in a diverse population of individuals at Longmont Circles (e.g., including those who were and were not living in poverty).

**Payne’s framework of poverty and its influence on Circles.** In addition to being deeply rooted in concepts of social class, Circles is entrenched in Ruby Payne’s (1996; Payne et al., 2006) framework of poverty, as this section describes. Payne’s work on poverty largely described categorical differences (i.e., hidden rules) between people who come from impoverished, middle class, and wealthy backgrounds, and that work provided recommendations—mostly in relation to K–12 educational contexts—for how people (e.g., educators, government officials, and human services employees) can more effectively and empathetically interact with people who are economically disadvantaged. Drawing from these distinctions, Payne “characterizes the worldview shared among people living in poverty as being chaotic, living from moment to moment, valuing entertainment more than anything else, and disregarding the consequences of one’s actions” (Bomer et al., 2008, p. 2519).

The influence of Payne’s framework is apparent in Circles’ practices in a variety of ways, including Circles’ explanations of social class (e.g., drawing directly from Payne’s three-group categorization of social class, and framing class as based in access to resources rather than as a financial condition) and poverty (e.g., categorizing poverty not using income-based determinants but as a “mindset” and a “culture”; Payne, 1996, p. 61). Payne’s influence also is apparent in the way that Circles’ materials (e.g., the Circles manual, training handouts, and marketing materials)

hazily characterize (or, in many cases, ignores) relationships between poverty and broader concepts of race, ethnicity, and gender. Furthermore, Circles is very open about the use of Payne's framework in its curriculum. As Circles' founder Scott C. Miller (2008) explained:

Incorporating Dr. Payne's insights into our Circles Campaigns provides Circle Leaders and Allies a fresh orientation and a new language for more successfully negotiating their new relationships. People become more patient and understanding after realizing that, as in any relationship involving different cultures, hidden rules are unknowingly broken. Once such hidden rules—assumptions and attitudes—are acknowledged and discussed, people can learn, forgive, teach, heal, and move on. (p. 7)

However, despite the warm embrace that the Circles program has given Payne, many researchers and educational theorists (see, e.g., Bohn, 2007; Bommer et al., 2008; Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2005, 2006, 2008b; Kunjufu, 2007; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005) have critiqued Payne's findings, citing flaws in her method (e.g., lack of scholarly research), evidence (e.g., largely anecdotal and undocumented), and analysis. For example, Bommer et al. (2008) documented this lack of empirical backing by claimed:

In her [1996] book, Payne refers to her claims as "data," although she has conducted no actual research. She cites few sources, and when she does cite, the source is often not a research study or does not say what she says it does. We have a broad view of research and acknowledge many valid ways of knowing that are not research. But claims to have data and research to support generalizations about a population should be possible to confirm. Schools are, after all, academic communities, and one should apply at least minimal standards of academic convention to information and perspective exchanged among education professionals. Furthermore, Payne does not write as a practitioner,

embedding her claims in narratives of her own practice. She writes in generalities, as if her claims were founded upon research data. (p. 2500)

Perhaps most disturbingly, Payne's critics have described her work as framing the differences in social class from a perspective that highlights deficiencies in the ways that people living in poverty think and interact, rather than focusing on how structural inequalities make life easier for some classes and more difficult for others. In framing differences between classes in this way, Payne's work veers into the realm of two ideologies of poverty and social class that have been heavily critiqued for their damaging impact on the public's understanding of poverty: the "culture of poverty" perspective and deficit theory, each of which is explained in more detail below.

**"Culture of poverty."** The idea of a "culture of poverty" emerged from Oscar Lewis (1959), an anthropologist who studied small Mexican communities. O. Lewis used the term (originally called "subculture of poverty") to describe the unique traits (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors)—50 of which are documented in O. Lewis's (1961) book *The Children of Sanchez*—shared by the generalized population of people living in poverty that both develop from their impoverished lifestyle and that perpetuate it. Describing the culture of poverty that he claimed is both generalizable and observable, O. Lewis (1963/1998) said:

The people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness. . . . People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are a marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own

neighborhood, their own way of life. Usually, they have neither the knowledge, the vision nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves elsewhere in the world. In other words, they are not class conscious, although they are very sensitive indeed to status distinctions. (p. 7)

Although O. Lewis used this description to portray many people living in poverty, he also asserted that not all people who are poor belong to the “culture of poverty.” Moreover, the socioeconomic class of poverty is not the primary determinant of “culture of poverty” affiliation; rather, O. Lewis explained that even when individuals are “desperately poor,” they are able to move out of the “culture of poverty” when they develop class consciousness, become “members of trade union organizations,” or “adopt an internationalist outlook on the world” (p. 7).

The “culture of poverty” idea was rapidly appropriated by scholars to explain the prevalence and perpetuation of poverty for certain cultural and ethnic groups, such as Latinos (O. Lewis, 1966) and African Americans (Jones & Luo, 1999). For example, “culture of poverty” scholars might explain the disproportionate number of black single mothers, as compared to the number of white single mothers, with the idea that the “black community” does not value marriage. The term was introduced into popular culture during two subsequent events in the 1960s. First, Harrington (1962) wrote the book *The Other America*, which detailed the exclusionary structural mechanisms that perpetuate poverty. Three years later, the term was introduced into policy discussions in a 1965 report authored by Daniel Moynihan, then Labor Secretary to President Lyndon B. Johnson, to explain black Americans’ failure to achieve racial equality.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1960s, the “culture of poverty” was a substantial part of the public’s understanding of the causes of poverty (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

Since then, the term largely has been contested on the grounds that differences among people living in poverty are just as prevalent and significant as differences between members of different socioeconomic classes (though some scholars have documented differences between social classes; for example, Lubrano, 2004, asserted that there is a middle class way of speaking that is not commonly used by working class or poor people, and Marvin, 2006, made distinctions between the *text class* and the *body class*). As such, scholars in a variety of disciplines have critiqued “culture of poverty” ideas (see, e.g., Coward, Feagin, & Williams, 1973; Gorski, 2008b; Harvey & Reed, 1996; Irelan, Moles, & O’Shea, 1969; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Roach & Gursslin, 1967), and, through systematic research, they have demonstrated that there is no singular or generalizable culture of poverty (see, e.g., Abell & Lyon, 1979; Gans, 1995; Gorski, 2005; Harris, 1976; Jones & Luo, 1999; Ng & Rury, 2006; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003). Furthermore, research demonstrates that a primary unifying feature of people who live in poverty is “a set of structural, systemic, oppressive conditions disproportionately affecting the most economically disadvantaged people, such as a lack of access to quality healthcare, housing, nutrition, education, political power, clean water and air, and other basic needs” (Gorski, 2008a, p. 135). As such, what is particularly problematic—and potentially damaging to people living in poverty—about the “culture of poverty” ideology is that it overgeneralizes poverty, and, in doing so, it ignores both individual experience and structural oppression.

Interestingly, proponents of the “culture of poverty” ideology—including Payne—claim that the argument draws attention to the unique attributes (e.g., creativity and perseverance) of those living in poverty by highlighting the “positive adaptive mechanisms” that are socially constructed and implemented by those who are poor to “survive in otherwise impossible social and material conditions” (Harvey & Reed, 1996, pp. 466, 467; see O. Lewis’s, 1963, response to

criticisms of his work). In doing so, Harvey and Reed (1996) argued that O. Lewis's model "speaks in defense of the poor and their creative abilities" by "keep[ing] open the possibility that under propitious political circumstances the poor contain within themselves the skills necessary to forge their own self-liberation" (p. 467).

Furthermore, *The New York Times* published a recent article by P. Cohen (2010) that claimed the phrase "culture of poverty" is reappearing in academic, political, and public discourse on poverty, as scholars are "conceding that culture and persistent poverty are enmeshed" (para. 3) and want to foreground the many ways that attitudes, values, and normative behavior are factors in how individuals address the challenges of living in poverty. In particular, young scholars who are unfamiliar with the "baggage" (P. Cohen, para. 3) of Moynahan's debate are the primary users of the term, and, according to Massey, a sociologist, this comeback largely is caused by society having "finally reached the stage where people aren't afraid of being politically incorrect (cited in P. Cohen, para. 5). However, P. Cohen asserted that contemporary scholars' use of this term was adapted from O. Lewis's (1959, 1961, 1963/1998, 1966) original culture of poverty model in important ways, including by foregrounding change and diversifying with a culture of poverty, understanding a "culture" as a grouping of "shared understandings" (para. 12) rather than as a homogeneous entity, and by attribut[ing] destructive attitudes and behaviors to inherent moral character but to sustained racism and isolation" (para. 11).

In keeping with this recent reemergence, Payne's (1996) framework, appropriated by Circles, draws "freely (Gorski, 2008a, p. 135) on O. Lewis's (1959, 1961, 1963/1998, 1966) ideas on the culture of poverty myth. However, unlike contemporary scholars, Payne's use of the "culture of poverty" term has not been adapted (e.g., to account for the historical influences of racism and isolation) but, rather, closely models O. Lewis's original use of describing poverty

as a monolithic culture. Payne characterized poverty as a collective mindset that “presents families in poverty through homogenizing, stereotyped caricatures, as stick figures lacking any complexity, depth, or ‘realness’” (Osei-Kofi, 2005, p. 370), the sum of which Livingston and Hiller (2005) called “a cookbook example of how to other” (para. 35) people living in poverty. At the “root” of Payne’s framework is the idea “that poverty persists because people in poverty don’t know the rules of the middle class” (Gorski, 2006, para.17). As a result, Payne “seems to want economically disadvantaged students to assimilate into social and educational systems that they often experience as oppressive, to overcome their moral and intellectual deficiencies, and strive for the culture of the middle class (Gorski, 2008a, p. 140).

*Deficit theory.* Second, by using stereotypes to frame members of a supposed “culture,” both the culture of poverty ideology and Payne’s perspective (albeit without explicitly using the term “deficit”) represent deficit theory (see, e.g., Valencia, 1997), which asserts that people are poor because of their internal deficiencies (e.g., lacking morals or intelligence) rather than as a result of external (e.g., societal and systemic) factors. Deficit theory, perhaps even more than the “culture of poverty” philosophy, contains serious and damaging ideologies that sway public opinion and national policy. If deficit theory is taken seriously, people believe that poverty results not from societal factors and structural inequalities, such as inequities in power, access, and opportunity, but, instead, from the individual deficiencies of people who are poor. As a result, societal members are able to justify policies and programs that disproportionately privilege individuals who are economically advantaged over those who are poor, using the argument that people who are poor are less deserving of resources.

This deficit perspective, as Bommer et al. (2008) explained, is “both essentializing of members of groups, so that all ‘people in poverty’ share characteristics, and is simultaneously

individualistic, placing the fault for poverty on the inadequate individual” (p. 2523). Applying deficit theory to the values of people who are poor results in what Gans (1995) labeled the “undeserving poor”: individuals who do not deserve equal access to resources because they do not value the assets that those resources promote (e.g., education, employment, and marriage).

Payne’s deficit orientation is apparent in the way that she framed poverty as being the result of particular characteristics of people living in poverty (e.g., their perspective on time, use of humor, belief in fate, and type of family structure). For example, Gorski (2006) documented some of these orientations in Payne’s (1996) book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*:

According to Payne [1996], people in poverty are bad parents: “The typical pattern in poverty for discipline is to verbally chastise the child, or physically beat the child, then forgive and feed him/her” (p. 37). They are also criminals: “Also, individuals in poverty are seldom going to call the police . . . [who] may be looking for them. . . .” (pp. 37–38). They are disloyal: “Allegiances may change overnight; favoritism is a way of life” (p. 74). They are violent and “on the streets”: “If students in poverty don’t know how to fight physically, they are going to be in danger on the streets” (p. 100). And, according to Payne, people in poverty are unmotivated addicts: “And for some, alcoholism, laziness, lack of motivation, drug addiction, etc., in effect make the choices for the individual” (p. 148). (para. 18)

Gorski (2006) went on to refute these claims by explaining:

Although research indicates some differences in child discipline practices and levels of day-to-day physical violence between economically deprived communities and middle or upper class communities, the fact remains that *most* people in poverty are responsible, hard working, drug and alcohol free, and not “on the streets” (a phrase that may also

cycle the stereotype that all poor people live in urban communities, when many live in rural communities. These people—the average, hard working, employed, drug free people in poverty—are largely invisible in [Payne’s works]. (para. 18)

Hence, according to Gorski (2006), Payne’s philosophy “exemplifies deficit theory by suggesting that the best way to address class and poverty . . . is to facilitate change in [people who are poor] while ignoring . . . structural inequalities” (para. 16)

To make these leaps in framing, Payne pinned poverty on factors (e.g., parental employment status, and parental education) that actually are outcomes rather than causes of poverty (Rank, 2004). As documented earlier in this chapter, poverty is caused by a complex web of systematic factors, including a growing dearth of living wage jobs, inadequate federal aid programs, insufficient health care, limited access to technological and educational resources, and general apathy to the problem of poverty by U.S. citizens, politicians, and policy makers. As such, Gans (1995) called for poverty research to focus not on these outcomes but on “the forces, processes, agents, and institutions. . . . that ‘decide’ that a proportion of the population will end up poor” (p. 127). However, Payne largely ignored any mention of structural factors that contribute to and perpetuate poverty (see, e.g., Bohn, 2007; Gorski, 2005, 2006; Ng & Rury, 2006) or, oppositely, of any structural advantages for people not living in poverty. For Payne, it seems, the problem is not *poverty* but *those who are poor*.

In sum, Payne’s framework perpetuates the culture of poverty and deficit theory ideologies in her representations of poverty as a definable mindset, rather than as a material condition, that applies to a homogeneous group of generalized individuals. Moreover, according to Payne, the collective mindset of people living in poverty largely focuses on self-limiting or negative values, ways of behaving, and/or conceptualizations of the world that perpetuate

poverty and that negatively affect people living in it. The impact of Payne's influence on Circles, and of the broader perspective on poverty that Circles adopts, is explored further in subsequent chapters. However, despite this disturbing perspective on poverty and individuals living in poverty, Circles was chosen as the site of study for this research for three specific reasons, as discussed below.

### **Choice of Longmont Circles as Study Site**

Longmont Circles, as a local site of the national Circles campaign, was chosen for study for three primary reasons: its unique and successful approach to ending poverty, its use of CCPs to build community, and its focus on communicative community building as a means of aiding people in their efforts to move out of poverty. Each of these reasons is explained below.

**Circles' unique and successful approach to ending poverty.** First, Circles is a unique and innovative local program with a national history of success in working with people living in poverty. Circles is unique in that it develops and implements specific CCPs to build community in a diverse group of participants for the purpose of developing people's social capital to enable them to move out of poverty. Although the practice of building community in a group as a method to cope with social problems is not a new idea, using it in the context of solving poverty is quite innovative. As explained earlier, because Circles addresses structural causes of poverty (e.g., lack of community), it differs in important ways from more traditional programs that attempt to lessen the immediate adverse effects of poverty.

The Boulder County Circles Campaign is a relatively new addition to the Boulder County poverty initiative. The first countywide Boulder County Circles Campaign planning meeting open to the public was held on March 17, 2010. Interest meetings and training programs for Longmont Allies began later that month (March, 2010), and the first Longmont community

dinner was held on Monday, September 13, 2010 (and dinners have continued since then every Monday night). Community dinners for the Lafayette site launched in March 2011 (and have continued every Tuesday night), and the Boulder site launched in July 2011.

Additionally, although Circles is new to Boulder County, it has a successful history in other sites around the United States. Nationally, Circles currently operates in 30 states and has shown promising results. A recent national report tracking 33 families that had completed the Getting Ahead curriculum and whose members currently participate as Leaders in other states reported that for every \$1 spent on the program, \$2 in welfare and food stamp subsidies were returned to the state, and an additional \$4 was returned to the community as new earned income (Move the Mountain Leadership Center, 2010). After 6 months of participation in Circles, the median monthly earned income for those Leaders increased by 88% (from \$634 to \$1200), reliance on welfare benefits decreased by 30% (from \$436 to \$306), overall assets increased by 56%, and participants indicated that the number of “people in my life I can count on” had increased by 125% (Move the Mountain Leadership Center, 2010).

The Boulder County Circles Campaign also receives strong support and guidance from its national office, Move the Mountain, whose mission statement is “to inspire and equip thousands of *transformational leaders* and thousands of other groups to work toward the goal of ending poverty” (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 4). To accomplish that goal, Move the Mountain works to “ensure that useful knowledge gained from experience is embedded into the ongoing [Circles] process . . . [and that] unique talents, interests, strengths, and insights available are utilized to the fullest” (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 5). For these reasons, Longmont Circles, as a specific site of the Boulder County Circles Campaign, offers an innovative social justice-oriented program that has

demonstrated successful results in other locations across the United States for studying the impact of a communication and relationship-based approach to ending poverty.

**The role of communication in Circles' approach to ending poverty.** Second, communication is an explicit component of Circles' approach to ending poverty. The Circles manual stated that “communication is fundamental to leadership,” and explained that “strong and consistent” communication:

- Gives staff and community Allies reasons to care about your purpose
- Creates urgency to assist in the desired change
- Shows staff and community Allies how to proceed
- Builds support and dedication to the vision of ending poverty.
- Builds staff and community commitment to the new direction and strategy.
- Generates creative ideas and approaches
- Identifies the community's unique challenges
- Demonstrates how to maximize the community's strengths.
- Increases community awareness.
- Changes the mind-set of the community.
- Changes the goals and rules of the system.
- Empowers people to self-organize and find their own voice for change. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 209)

Facilitating open communication between Leaders and Allies is a primary goal of many of the practices employed by Circles, and communication is seen as a key step in practicing the values of Circles at community dinners. Additionally, Circles is built on a foundation of “clear, consistent, and well-organized” internal communication, which is seen as “fundamental to the

success of implementing change” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 90) and as a primary way to foster loyalty among participants. Communication skills also are identified as key qualities to be maintained by all of Circles’ staff members, particularly conflict-mediation and nonverbal communication skills (S. C. Miller et al., 2010). Circles’ staff and volunteers are trained to teach positive communication strategies (e.g., conflict resolution, active listening, positive encouragement, and honest and open communication) and to use CCPs that promote dialogue between Allies and Leaders. Given the communication focus, it is likely that participants in the Longmont Circles program will progress through different (more or less successful) communication skill levels as they learn new communicative practices together in a group. Additionally, this progression of communication skills was identified by National Circles Coach and Training Director, Karin VanZant, as an important and much-needed area of research on the Circles program (K. VanZant, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Moreover, as explained earlier in this chapter (and in more detail in Chapter 4), the Circles organization uses a communicative, interaction-based approach to build interpersonal relationships and to create community among a group of diverse individuals from different socioeconomic classes, with the primary goal of aiding people who are impoverished in their efforts to become self-sufficient and, eventually, to progress out of poverty. As such, the particularly strategies that Circles uses (explained above) are enacted through particular communicative practices that function at the group/collective level (CCPs).

**The role of community building in Circles’ approach to ending poverty.** Third, as explained above, community building is inherent to Circles’ core values, and, consequently, it is evidenced in numerous ways in the organization’s planning and implementation of its program. Fundamentally, Circles is designed as a model that is embedded within a physical community

(both the emerging Boulder County Circles Campaign community and the three geographic communities—Longmont, Lafayette, and Boulder—within which the programs are located) and symbolically and communicatively enacted by community members, with the goal of building community as a primary means of ending poverty. Building community, as S. C. Miller et al. (2010) explained, is identified as a one of the seven key principles of developing a Circles initiative:

Circles is based on building community to solve problems and reach goals more quickly and effectively. Encourage everyone, including your self, to do more things with the help of community. When you feel overwhelmed, as we all do from time to time, ask yourself “who can I ask to join me in thinking through this problem?” If you go across a race or class line for the help, all the better. Misery’s best friend is isolation; breaking out of it is liberating. (p. 14)

Additionally, the stated primary functions of many Circles’ practices include building community; for example, the expressed purpose of Circles community dinners is “building community and helping people with skills and plans for getting out of poverty” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 34). As such, community building is mentioned frequently in the Circles manual, and, thus, Circles offers a rich site for studying the relationship between communication and community building.

Additionally, staff members are hired for their ability to facilitate community building and to motivate volunteers to participate in community-building processes. Community building that “facilitate[s] relationships across race and class lines in such a way that individuals receive the flexible, relational support needed to lift themselves out of poverty” is identified as the “primary task” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 90) of Circles’ staff members. Furthermore, the

“primary quality [of a staff member is] the willingness to build a diverse, inclusive community around him or herself” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 90).

Thus, although the overarching *goal* of Circles is not building community between participants, building community is the primary *method* that Circles uses to accomplish its main goal of ending poverty. However, most Longmont Circles practices focus on communicatively accomplishing community building, and much less time and energy are devoted to direct action that people can take to get out of poverty. As such, Longmont Circles’ model of ending poverty can be conceptualized as a three-step process, where the strategic use of CCPs (e.g., to teach about poverty, build commitment to the program and to the emergent community, and to provide opportunities for individuals to empower themselves) builds a supportive community of people who are equipped and empower themselves to end poverty, leading to the eventual goal of ending poverty in the group and in the broader local and national communities.

### **Research Goals**

There are two primary goals of this study. First, this study explores how the five broad strategies employed by Circles, as described previously, are enacted via CCPs, by examining the practices involved in their framing and enactment during Longmont Circles’ community dinners and training sessions. Second, these CCPs are meant to have effects on the participants who use them, which likely can be categorized into two types: (a) effects about the meaning and meaningfulness of CCPs on participants (e.g., what participants think about the practices in which they are engaging and what meaning they hold for participants), and (b) effects specific to building community and to aiding people to move out of poverty (e.g., whether the practices build community among volunteers and affect participants’ movement out of poverty). Therefore, the second goal of this study is to investigate the effects that these communicative

practices have on Longmont Circles Allies and Leaders, particularly in terms of building community and in aiding Leaders to move out of poverty, and in relation to participants' beliefs, attitudes, skills, feelings of empowerment, interpersonal relationships, behavior, and goals and motivations.

Although Longmont Circles is only one communication-based solution to confronting the problem of poverty, it is an important program to study. As explained previously, most communication literature focuses on how poverty is represented in the media or on particular characteristics or behaviors of people who live in poverty; rarely does such research explore programs to end poverty, and, even less so, communicative practices of building community, interpersonal relationships, and social capital as steps to ending poverty. Thus, how CCPs are engaged in and understood by Circle participants, and the effects that those CCPs have on building community and enabling people to move out of poverty, deserve a closer look.

In turn, Longmont Circles provides a real-world group context within which to study the use and effects of CCPs for confronting an important social problem that is prevalent both in the local community where this study occurs and at the broader, national level. Hence, the purpose of this research is to explore the use of CCPs at Longmont Circles in relation to building community and aiding people to move out of poverty, documenting the use and framing of CCPs employed at Longmont Circles, meanings those practices hold for participants, and effects that those practices have on aiding people to build community and to move out of poverty. To accomplish this goal, as explained in the next chapter about methods employed, I observed, participated in, and documented CCPs engaged in by participants in Longmont Circles' community dinners, meetings, and training sessions, as well as the effects of engaging in those practices on Longmont Circles participants.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The Food Stamp Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in October 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Geronimus et al. (2001) found that 16-year-old white women living in the richest areas of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles had a life expectancy of 86 years, as compared to only 70 years for black women living in the poorest areas of the same locations, a difference of 16 years. Similarly, 16-year-old white men living in the most affluent areas had a life expectancy of 75 years, as compared to only 59 years for 16-year-old black men living in the poorest areas, also a difference of 16 years. Furthermore, Geronimus et al. explained that if the figures were for life expectancy *at birth*, instead of for 16 year olds, the life expectancy gap would have been much larger. Death rates in all geographic locations were very closely related to median household income, accounting almost entirely for differences in white and black deaths.

<sup>3</sup>Kawachi and Kennedy (1997) explored the item in the U.S. General Social Survey, “Most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance,” in relation to the Hoover Index (also known as the Robin Hood Index), which measures income inequality in each state in America. The researchers found that in the most equal states, only 10% to 15% of people felt that they could not trust others, whereas in the more unequal states, 40% of people felt that they could not trust others.

<sup>4</sup>Complete income statistics current through September 30, 2012 are available at [http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant\\_recipients/eligibility.htm#income](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm#income)

<sup>5</sup>Regarding the overrepresentation of poor black children in news magazine coverage, as Clawson and Trice (2000) explained:

Children are usually thought of as a fairly deserving group of poor people (Cook and Barrett 1992); however, the large proportion of black children among the magazine poor may undermine that belief. In Iyengar’s (1990) experimental research on attributions of responsibility for poverty, subjects indicated that black children should take responsibility for their own plight, whereas white children were not expected to solve their own problems. (p. 59)

<sup>6</sup>In many ways, the ideas promoted in this study privilege a communication culture, or the cultural assumption that communicating generally is good and can be beneficial to solving problems. In doing so, I assume, as Cameron (2000) asserted, that it is “good to talk” (p. 1). As such, this study may have less traction in communities that do not privilege a communication culture (e.g., for U.S. Native Americans). Moreover, Circles privileges verbal communication—using talk in specific ways (e.g., sharing narratives or New and Good events) to accomplish particular goals (e.g., promoting positivity and building community)—rather than nonverbal communication, although, at times, the latter (e.g., hugs) is encouraged as well.

<sup>7</sup>The names of all Circles participants and staff used in this report are pseudonyms.

<sup>8</sup>The Generating Opportunities framework, funded by county and federal stimulus funds, is a three-step process that includes education, involvement, and action. First, Bridges Out of Poverty classes, attended by almost all Boulder County employees working on issues of poverty, are educational workshops that help community members to understand causes and impacts of poverty, and to better understand the struggles and problems of people living in poverty, in hopes of changing the patterns of interaction between service providers and citizens of Boulder County who are poor. For example, Bridges Out of Poverty works with local businesses to better understand the needs of entry-level employees who may be poor and to improve their interaction with those employees and to increase their retention. As Heimer (2010) explained:

Bridges explores information and tools to build genuine relationships of mutual respect with people from other backgrounds and walks of life and suggests the redesign of programs and procedures to better serve people who come to our organizations for assistance. (p. 1)

Second, the Getting Ahead program, as explained in the text, involves 15 weeks of workshops where people living in poverty explore structural barriers that make it difficult to escape generational poverty, set personal goals, and come up with ways to achieve those goals to eventually move themselves out of poverty. Third, the Circles Campaign, the focus of this study, “is designed to provide community-based support for ‘Getting Ahead’ graduates in their efforts to achieve their goals” (Heimer, 2010, p. 3).

Additionally, the Generating Opportunities model contains the following features, as articulated by DeVol (2007):

1. While poverty can be explored through many lenses, the [Generating Opportunities] model focuses on economic class.
2. Relationships can be fostered “across class lines that honor the knowledge and problem-solving skills that everyone brings to the table for planning and decision-making.”
3. “People of all classes, races, and political persuasions” can and should participate in helping solve poverty.
4. “People in poverty are understood to be problem solvers. Their knowledge and insights about poverty and the community are needed to develop meaningful plans.”
5. “Bringing people together across class lines creates energy for change” at “individual, organizational, and community levels” by building social capital and healthy communities. Accountability is important, in that “Once people form relationships of mutual respect they are much less likely to abandon each other.”
6. Partnerships are important. For example, “[Generating Opportunities] is exploring partnerships with organizations that address systemic racism.” (p. 1–2)

<sup>9</sup>Because Circles foregrounds social class, other forms of diversity (e.g., racial and cultural differences) noticeably are backgrounded in the program’s literature (e.g., marketing and training materials), practices (e.g., during the poverty simulation), and rhetoric (e.g., staff members’ explanations of the causes of poverty).

<sup>10</sup>By making a compelling case for the many structural and historical factors perpetuating inequality, Moynihan's (1965) report spurred the creation of numerous jobs and job programs (e.g., education and vocational training) for blacks, specifically. However, despite highlighting these systemic factors, Moynihan's report largely blamed the absence of a nuclear family for black Americans' failure to achieve racial equality, and it framed poverty as brought on by the particular choices made or values held by blacks. For instance, Moynihan described black families as victims in a "tangle of pathology" (para. 9) brought on by the problematic matriarchal structure (largely, unmarried single black mothers) and welfare dependency of their group. As the report claimed:

At the center of the [Negro] tangle of pathology is the weakness of the family structure. Once or twice removed, it will be found to be the principal source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation. (para. 9)

As such, Moynihan's report largely has been criticized by academics and policy makers alike for essentially blaming blacks for their poverty.

## CHAPTER 3

## METHODS

To address the two goals of this study, I conducted a qualitative study of Longmont Circles. As a situated activity, qualitative research “locates the observer in the world . . . . It involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world and involves researchers making sense of phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Such research stands in contrast to the vast majority of quantitative research conducted about poverty, with most researchers who study programs for people in poverty focusing on trends in U.S. Census Bureau data or administering survey questionnaires in a pretest–posttest format to assess the impact of those programs on participants. Few researchers have employed qualitative methods to study the experiences of participants in programs such as Circles, and even fewer have ethnographically studied the experiences of participants as they currently are engaged in a program (as opposed to after they have completed it). However, as Query et al. (2009) explained:

It is not enough merely to answer research questions and confirm hypotheses quantitatively; investigators also need to honor the lived experiences of those they are privileged to study to provide life-altering narrative accounts of effective communicative practices. . . . Thus, although it is theoretically beneficial to demonstrate statistically significant differences between conditions/groups and relationships between variables, it is equally important to hear, through qualitative methods, participants’ voices; to share the results of applied research with those studied; and to document benefits gained from the

research conducted, with the understanding that it may take some time before those benefits are recognized. (p. 98)

By promoting an understanding of how communication events occur in a social scene, ethnographic methods can contribute to research on antipoverty programs by offering rich descriptions that show the multiple layers and complexity of the processes involved in group efforts to provide opportunities for people to empower themselves to move out of poverty. Qualitative, ethnographic methods, thus, can offer valuable grounded, inductive data about communicative practices involved in building cross-class interpersonal relationships and in fostering economic self-sufficiency and community sustainability. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry about the particular CCPs employed by a program to address issues of poverty will add much-needed depth to the research literature, both as a result of the ethnographic process used (e.g., by exploring meanings and effects of the framing, and use of those communicative practices) and the marginalized population studied (e.g., by incorporating the words of people who currently live in poverty into communication research) in this context.

### **Data Collection**

To align with the purpose of the research of understanding practices engaged in by Longmont Circles participants and effects of those practices, four methodological practices were used to obtain data: (a) participant observation of Longmont Circles' community dinners, meetings, and volunteer training sessions (including Allies 101 and Bridges out of Poverty); (b) review of organizational data and training documents; (c) interviews conducted with Longmont Circles' staff and participants to better understand the effects of the program on participants; and (d) a questionnaire completed by participants about their experience with Longmont Circles. Each practice is explained in below.

### **Participant Observation**

Attending Longmont Circles' meetings regularly allowed me to observe how practices were framed by facilitators (i.e., staff or participants) and practically enacted by participants, as well to remain updated on participants' progress toward their goals and potential challenges, and to document any noticeable effects of the practices on participants' lives. Over the course of 21 months, I observed 6 Boulder County Circles Campaign training sessions, 24 Longmont community dinner meetings, and 12 other Longmont Circles meetings (e.g., informal gatherings and inner-circle meetings). Additionally, I observed and participated in 11 Guiding Coalition meetings, 16 Recruitment Team group and individual meetings, and 4 other Boulder County Circles Campaign events (e.g., information sessions, volunteer activities, and public events and demonstrations). Lastly, I met informally on numerous occasions with Boulder County Circles Campaign staff. Together, these observations totaled approximately 145 hours spent in the field.

For 6 months (from June 2010 to December 2010), my role in these research scenes was that of a participant-observer, which Lindlof and Taylor (2002) described as a researcher who enters a field with an acknowledged investigative purpose, and who, by virtue of being in the scene, can observe from more than one level of membership. In this case, I observed from the vantage point of both Ally (September 2010 to December 2010) and Recruitment Team Chair (June 2010 to December 2010). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) claimed that being a participant-observer often involves negotiation of a special status, and, in this case, staff and participants alike knew that my research purposes were the primary reason for my participation. As such, when Allies and Leaders formally paired up to form their permanent circles, my role switched to being primarily observation-based, and I continued to enact that role for the remaining 13 months.

When participants broke into smaller groups to eat or engage in activities, I joined groups to gain perspective on how participants were engaged in Longmont Circles' practices, and I listened to how they interacted with each other. I varied which groups I sat with on a regular basis as a means of gaining diverse participant voices and experiences. There also were times when participants invited me to personal events, such as holiday celebrations and their children's school performances, or to meet as friends for coffee, which I often attended but did not treat those occasions as formal opportunities for research. Overall, I felt that my presence at these formal and informal occasions, once negotiated, was welcomed by participants and staff alike.

These participation and observation experiences offered opportunities to hear how Longmont Circles' practices were articulated, and to consider how aspects of the program (e.g., poverty, social class, and community building) were framed by staff and participants. Additionally, my close contact with participants enabled me to consider how participants were oriented to the stated goals of the program, as articulated by staff members and from Circles. Finally, these observations were opportunities to see firsthand how participants interacted with each other as they developed interpersonal relationships, and how they were affected by the practices in which they were engaging.

To document these practices and other foci, in both fieldnotes during those observations and in post-meeting memos, I recorded how CCPs were engaged in by Longmont Circles and documented their effects on participating individuals and on the development of the group. I took care to document both intentional CCPs (e.g., those that were scripted or predetermined by the Circles organization) and emergent CCPs (e.g., those that arose from Longmont Circles' participants) that are organized and enacted by people purposefully (as opposed to unintentionally), and that are at the group (as opposed to individual) level. Within these

constraints, I documented (a) particular CCPs that are engaged in by Longmont Circles participants, (b) how those CCPs are introduced and framed by Longmont Circles, (c) how they are enacted or engaged in by Longmont Circles participants, and (d) what immediate or long-term effects they have on individuals and/or on the larger group.

### **Interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted to understand participants' experience of Longmont Circles. Participants were asked questions about: (a) their role in Longmont Circles, (b) why they joined Longmont Circles, (c) the goals of Longmont Circles, (d) the success of Longmont Circles, (e) practices employed by Longmont Circles, (f) meanings of those practices, and (g) the extent to which, and in what ways, they viewed those practices as affecting their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, goals, interpersonal relationships, sense of community, and progression out of poverty. Sample questions included: "How is Longmont Circles different from other programs in which you participate?" "Has Longmont Circles changed your beliefs about people living in poverty?" "What is working best about Longmont Circles?" and "What, if anything, do you do differently since joining Longmont Circles?" (see interview guide in Appendix B). The length of time for individual interviews varied greatly, ranging from 53 minutes to over 4 hours. The total collected audio data represented 37 hours and 41 minutes of recorded interviews.

Twelve participants also participated in a 45-minute focus group interview, where they offered feedback about the effects of their participation in Longmont Circles on their lives. The focus group and individual interviews complemented my participant observation by providing deeper insight into how CCPs are framed by facilitators (which may be interpreted differently by facilitators and participating individuals), what meanings participants ascribed to those practices,

and what effects participants believed resulted from engaging in them. Throughout the process of collecting the data, including interviews, I treated participants' accounts as being accurate personal narratives that represent their subjective experiences and reflect their personal beliefs and values. Moreover, although interviewees' comments occasionally demonstrated some disagreement, there were no significant incidents of contradictory data (e.g., where a participant's account directly contradicted or invalidated another participant's account).

### **Document Analysis of Precollected Data**

Participants also were asked to grant permission for me to review data that they have submitted to Circles, or that the Boulder County Circles Campaign already has collected on them (e.g., the Ally volunteer request form and the Leader questionnaire collected in September 2010). These forms and questionnaires included participants' demographic information (e.g., age, income) and information about participants' motivations for joining Circles.

### **Questionnaire**

Finally, I administered and collected a completed questionnaire from 12 people (i.e., all of whom were present at the Monday evening Circles Community Dinner meeting when the questionnaire was distributed) about the effects of their participation with Longmont Circles. The questionnaire (see Appendix C) was designed to supplement observational and interview data with a categorical account of participants' experiences with Longmont Circles' practices and the impacts of those practices on their lives. The questionnaire asked participants about a variety of topics, including the length of time that they had participated in Circles; which Circles' practices they found helpful; the community climate of Circles; and changes in their thoughts, behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and beliefs about poverty because of participating in Longmont Circles. The Leader questionnaire included four additional questions, asking Leaders

what would need to happen for them to move out of poverty and whether they have the necessary understanding, resources, and support/friendship to make those changes happen at present.

Questionnaires were completed by 12 of the 17 Longmont Circles' participants (70%), including seven Allies and five Leaders, and, as such, caution should be taken not to overgeneralize these results to the entire Longmont Circles population. Additionally, although the questionnaires contain data that potentially is analyzable for future studies on Longmont Circles, this study used those data only as a secondary analysis to examine the effects of the program on participants.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), qualitative data analysis begins with efforts to manage and reduce data, and then sorting data into conceptual categories, "labeling and breaking down raw data and reconstituting them into patterns, themes, concepts, and propositions" (p. 210). To prepare data for analysis, I organized all notes, memos, and transcripts of selected interview data.

With nearly 38 hours of recorded interview data, I knew that a full transcription would be too large of an undertaking. During interviews, I took careful notes on themes to explore and began to compile a working list of practices and effects. I then listened to all interview data and mapped out specific sections to be transcribed fully. A \$900 Beverly Sears grant from The Graduate School and a \$400 grant from the Department of Communication (both at the University of Colorado Boulder) made it possible to hire a transcriber to complete most of this work, and I transcribed the rest of the selections myself. Afterwards, I listened, again, to all transcribed interview data as I read through the written transcriptions to fix any errors.

In the first steps of data reduction, I combed through data from notes, memos, and interview transcripts to compile what became a list of 20 practices that were organized and purposefully enacted by participants at the group level. All of the practices included in that list were successfully established and enacted by most members at the group level. Other practices were present in dyadic and/or subgroup interaction, but they were not taken up by most members or enacted at the group level, and, as such, they were not included in the list. Including some of those other practices might have led to observing more instances of tensions or disagreements between group members. Moreover, I did not examine microlevel processes of these practices being taken up by individual group members (e.g., regarding the practice of sharing meals together, I chose not to focus on matters such as individuals' choices about where to sit, what to eat, or particular nuances of their dinner conversations) but, instead, concentrated on their macrolevel enactments (e.g., focusing on various aspects of participants sharing meals, such as group-level discussions, shared acts of reciprocity during the meals, and majority- or group-level effects of members' participation in these meals). Focusing my observations and analyses more on individuals instead of the group as a collective might have led to seeing different things and coming to different conclusions.

I used the list of group-level practices during observations of weekly meetings to document some of the practices in greater detail. I also reviewed notes, memos, interview transcripts, and completed participant questionnaires to compile a list of effects of Longmont Circles practices in eight categories: effects on participants' (a) beliefs and knowledge base, (b) feelings and attitudes, (c) skills, (d) self-esteem and feelings of empowerment, (e) interactions and interpersonal relationships, (f) behaviors, (g) goals and motivations, and (h) Leaders' ability to move out of poverty. In analyzing the collected data, I primarily relied on interview data to

privilege participants words and views. To a lesser extent, I also drew on data from my fieldnotes, particularly when those data usefully supplemented the interview data.

The questionnaire was created during the later stages of developing categories of practices and effects, and, thus, became a tool that was used to triangulate data from observations and interviews, and to check for consistency in earlier coding of practices and effects. Further data management involved editing and refining these categories.

As a second level of analysis, I examined the body of data for larger themes and concepts. At that point, the idea of “interactional capital” (presented in Chapter 5) emerged as salient and meaningful. Throughout the analysis process, I conducted informal follow-up interviews to ask participants about specific effects of Longmont Circles’ practices, to explore the emerging idea of interactional capital in more detail, and to check in after significant events had occurred in their lives.

### **Data Presentation**

In presenting data, to preserve participants’ anonymity, all names that are used (including names of Leaders, Allies, and staff) are pseudonyms. In two cases, however, data are presented without these pseudonyms (e.g., an Ally said . . .) to guarantee anonymity: (a) where a person’s identity would be apparent based on identifying information within the quote, and (b) in focus group discussions where a comment cannot be attributed to a specific purpose. Hence, the data are presented in slightly different ways to respect participants’ privacy.

### **Participants**

As explained in Chapter 2, there are three participant groups for this research: (a) Allies, (b) Leaders, and (c) staff. First, the group of 11 Allies represents 5 male and 6 female volunteers of diverse age (ranging from 26 to 60) and ethnic distribution (primarily white but some of

Hispanic and Asian backgrounds) who share the characteristic that they currently do not live in poverty. Second, the group of six Leaders represents two men and four women also of diverse age (ranging from 35 to 70) and ethnic distribution (primarily white but some of Hispanic backgrounds) who currently are living in, and working to get out of, poverty.

Third, there are two Boulder County Circles Campaign staff members: Circles Coordinator, Marco, and Circles Coach, Liza. As Circles' Coordinator, Marco is responsible for recruiting and retaining Leaders and Allies, and for facilitating Guiding Coalition (the governing board comprised of local community representatives, such as human services staff, business leaders, and people living in poverty) meetings and all Circles training and orientations (excluding Getting Ahead classes). As Circles Coach, Liza serves in a case management role, working with Leaders and their families and Allies to set and achieve goals on the path toward self-sufficiency, focusing on "encouraging and providing information rather than doing what they can be doing themselves" (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 85). In this role, Liza also is responsible for making sure that the Circles—comprised of a Leader and his or her Allies—are functioning positively and in a way that encourages a Leader's progress toward his or her goals.

In total, this study enrolled 11 Allies, 6 Leaders, and the 2 staff members, which represents the entire current population of Longmont Circles and all of the staff members currently employed. All Longmont Circles participants consented to participate (for a copy of the consent form, see Appendix D), and all participants were included in the study.

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

This project received initial approval (see Appendix E) from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Colorado Boulder on January 27, 2011 (Protocol Number 10-0364). The project, again, received approval (see Appendix F) on November 1, 2011, for an

amendment to the original research methods (to include the questionnaire), and received continuing approval (see Appendix G) on January 31, 2012. Additionally, the research is supported by both the local Boulder County Circles Campaign organization and the national Circles office. A letter of support (see Appendix H) from the local Boulder County Circles Campaign office was included with the IRB application.

## CHAPTER 4

## FINDINGS

As explained in Chapter 3, using ethnographic methods, this study sought to document the collective communicative practices (CCPs) engaged in by Longmont Circles participants and how they are used, to gain insight into the effects that those practices have on participants. The two purposes of this research study were to (a) document particular CCPs engaged in by Longmont Circles participants and (b) examine effects of those CCPs on participants' beliefs, attitudes, skills, feelings of empowerment, interpersonal relationships and sense of community, behaviors, goals and motivations, and ability to move out of poverty. Accordingly, first, this section examines and describes the CCPs of Longmont Circles, and then analyzes those practices in light of their intended purposes (e.g., in relation to Circles' stated communicative strategies) and actual effects.

**Collective Communicative Practices at Longmont Circles**

As explained in Chapter 2, the national Circles program outlines five broad communicative strategies employed by Circles, which include:

1. *Defining a common vision* of ending poverty for everyone to work toward.
2. *Defining a common language* to discuss similarities and differences. (Use aha! Process, Inc. books: *Bridges Out of Poverty* for Allies and *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* for leaders)
3. *Defining a shared set of values* and principles to guide the healthy development of the community.

4. *Establishing an atmosphere of permission to use common sense*, so that people feel free to do whatever is most appropriate to solve particular problems and reach defined goals.
5. *Holding regularly scheduled meetings* to share and learn together [called Circles community dinners at Longmont Circles] of Leaders include a free meal and childcare to make it easier to attend. (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 13)

To enact these five strategies, the Circles program the Circles uses communication practices that function at the group level (CCPs). Although Longmont Circles incorporates a wide variety of CCPs into its programs, many which are relatively commonplace and others that may be more unique, there are 20 CCPs that seem most relevant to producing specific outcomes experienced by participants: (a) building new vocabularies, (b) defining Ally and Leader roles, (c) using communicative practices that are sensitive to the issue of class, (d) practicing confidentiality, (e) avoiding proselytizing, (f) using a sharing table and request list, (g) announcements, (h) sitting in a circle for all meetings, (i) practicing New and Good, (j) sharing appreciation, (k) engaging in listening pairs, (l) running a poverty simulation, (m) sharing narratives and/or goals, (n) maintaining a positive orientation to poverty, (o) practicing reciprocity, (p) offering public speaking opportunities, (q) regularly sharing interactions between participants, (r) sharing meals together with other participants and staff, (s) doing recreational activities together, and (t) engaging in problem solving of obstacles to moving out of poverty.

These CCPs can be divided into two categories<sup>1</sup>: (a) those that are structured and offer specific rules for how participants should interact with one another, and (b) those that are less structured and create opportunities for interactions to occur but do not guide participants how to

talk during those interactions. The specific CCPs within each category are explained in the subsections below.

### **Heavily Structured Collective Communicative Practices**

Circles encouraged participant to interact through some formally structured CCPs that, typically, offered specific rules for how participants should interact with each other. Fourteen of the 20 CCPs fit in this category: (a) building new vocabularies, (b) defining Ally and Leader roles, (c) using communicative practices that are sensitive to the issue of class, (d) practicing confidentiality, (e) avoiding proselytizing, (f) using a sharing table and request list, (g) sitting in a circle for all meetings, (h) practicing New and Good, (i) sharing appreciations, (j) engaging in listening pairs, (k) running a poverty simulation, (l) sharing narratives and/or goals, and (m) maintaining a positive orientation to poverty. Each of these CCPs is explained below.

**New vocabularies.** One important Circles practice involved teaching new vocabularies to Allies and Leaders. For Leaders, learning these new vocabularies began during Getting Ahead training (described in Chapter 2); for Allies, these new vocabularies were learned during training or during interaction with other Circles' participants. For example, the vocabularies taught by Circles include new categorical or role descriptions, such as calling impoverished participants "Leaders" and financially prosperous participants "Allies." Circles' Coordinator staff member Marco described the intentional use of the "Leader" label:

We call them "Leaders" for a reason, because the people in poverty are supposed to be the people who are driving the plan to get out of poverty. It's not a case manager or a caseworker telling you what you need to do; this is really supposed to be circle leader-driven.

Additionally, the new vocabularies included alternative understandings of poverty-related concepts, such as social class. For example, a Leader explained the distinctions that Circles makes between *situational* and *generational* poverty,

I learned in my Getting Ahead Class that there are two types of poverty, situational and generational. Situational poverty is when your life is going along fine, you may not be rich but you are meeting all your needs, then some event happens that throws you into poverty. The event can be a sudden illness resulting in unexpected medical expenses, job loss, or the significant downturn in the economy. Generational poverty is when you are born in to poverty and that is all you know growing up.

As another example, participants were taught to label three distinct classes—lower class, middle class, and wealth—and to understand the differences between these three groups through the “hidden rules” (explained in more detail in Chapter 2) that each class uses, such as how members of each group think about food, understand the future, and use humor. Most of these new vocabularies (e.g., hidden rules) stem from the influence of Dr. Ruby Payne (see Chapter 2). Although Payne’s framework of poverty, which inclines sharply toward from culture of poverty and deficit model concepts, has been heavily critiqued, it is still the primary theoretical scaffolding used by the Circles organization.

**Defining Ally and Leader roles.** Another structured Longmont Circles practice involved clearly defining Ally and Leader roles. In fact, describing Ally and Leader roles is one of the primary purposes of Ally Training, detailed in Chapter 2.

Allies are described as “Circle members who are committed to helping the Circle Leader reach personal and family goals”, and Leaders are described as “adults in a family who are

committed to getting out of poverty” (S. C. Miller, 2010, p. 77). According to the Circles manual, the “job” of an Ally includes:

1. Be a friend first to your Circle Leader.
2. Learn about his, her, or their dream and ask how you can be of help.
3. Meet at least once a month for an hour or two with your Circle Leader and other Allies.
4. Review how things went last month and what the plan is for the coming month.
5. Learn your local Circles policy about giving financial help to your Circle Leader.
6. Do what you say you will do.
7. Look to your personal circle of friends and colleagues for potential Ad-hoc Allies [who are] “task” All[ies] available to offer support or a service [such as] help[ing to] change a tire, prepare a meal, drive someone to a job interview or doctor appointment, help with resumes, [or] be a tutor (S. C. Miller, 2010, p. 124).

Similarly, the manual identifies the “three primary goals” of a Leader as:

1. Create life changes that lead to permanent self-sufficiency
2. Develop unique gifts and leadership skills to lead the circle, contribute to the Circles initiative and give back to the community
3. Use experience of poverty and leading family to self-sufficiency to advocate within the community for changes in the systems barriers that keep poverty in place. (S. C. Miller, 2010, p. 102).

Allies frequently were reminded that “people in poverty need to be in charge of their lives” and that their job is not to fix a Leader but, rather, to be “a friend to the family, not a social worker [because] nobody needs to be rescued or fixed by you [rather,] offer help without

expectations.” (S. C. Miller, 2010, p. 57, p. 115). Similarly, the Circles manual suggested that Leaders “remember that the Allies on your circle are your friends, not social workers. Don’t expect them to ‘fix’ your situation” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 102). Rather than rescuing people, Allies are expected to provide friendly social and emotional support to help Leaders accomplish their goals.

The Circles manual also offered guidelines to Allies and Leaders about what is helpful and unhelpful. For example, listening to a Leader’s future story and asking how they can be of help is view by Circles as being helpful; telling Leaders “what they should do using your own future story for them” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 127) is deemed unhelpful. As another example, the manual suggested that being on time and following through with “what you say you will do” is helpful for Leaders; taking Ally time and responsibilities “lightly (out of a sense of entitlement) because you are the ‘helper’” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 127) is unhelpful.

**Using communicative practices that are sensitive of class.** Circles makes an effort to be sensitive of class divisions by asking Allies and Leaders to be conscious of, and, if need be, to adapt their normative communicative behaviors. For example, Allies are asked to come to meetings in casual clothes rather than business clothes, whenever possible; to read books that about economic class; to look for no-cost options if engaging in social outings with other Circles participants (social events, such as a game night, watching movies, hiking, or attending local sports events, are suggested); and they are reminded not to “expect Circle Leaders to approach meetings the way you do in the business world” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 115). As another example, Allies are asked to find ways to introduce themselves that “emphasize who [they] are, not what [they] do, (‘I’m from northern Minnesota and I love to ski’ instead of ‘I’m the director of marketing for a global research company’)” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 134), which the

practice of New and Good (discussed below) is designed to promote. Leaders are asked to “remember that Allies may not have any experience with poverty and may make mistakes” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 102). Hence, “the Circles initiative strives to be thoughtful about dealing with Allies and Circle Leaders in as parallel fashion as is possible” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 116).

Although Longmont Circles practices attempt to minimize these class divisions, the labels of Allies and Leaders clearly were marked in many ways. For example, the labels “Circle Leader” and “Ally” were included on the nametags that all participants wore during meetings, and Leaders and Allies frequently were divided into separate groups during meetings. Even without those labels, however, all Longmont Circles participants were keenly aware of each participant’s respective group (Ally or Leader).

**Practicing confidentiality.** Leaders and Allies both are expected to respect the privacy of the information shared at Longmont Circles. Information is only to be shared outside of the circle if the disclosing participant gives permission (meaning that many things are kept confidential within small Ally–Leader circles, as well as within the larger Longmont Circles group). The manual explained that sharing “would typically be for the purposes of gathering information or help . . . ; otherwise, “what is shared in Circles stays in Circles” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 126).

**Avoiding proselytizing.** A fundamental ground rule of Ally–Leader interaction is that participants resist proselytizing, or fostering their religious, political, or personal beliefs on others. Instead, “all participants are to be respected, as are their beliefs about faith . . . [and] “conversations of faith should be non-judgmental and pressure-free” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 126). Participants, therefore, are instructed to ask others if they want advice before offering any.

**Sharing table and request list.** Longmont Circles meetings incorporated a *sharing table*, where participants brought things that they wished to share with others in the group. The Circles manual explained that this practice “builds community and helps people declutter as well as obtain items for free” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 40). Items on the sharing table included those typically found in a yard sale, usually in good condition, ranging from clothing to books to vitamins. In Longmont, there also were regular donations of vegetables from a local farmers market. Additionally, if a participant is in need of a particular item or service, the staff will send out a *request list* by e-mail (see Appendix J), always keeping the requestors anonymous. A recent e-mail stated:

Hi Folks: We are sending this message out among our Circles community to see if we can acquire some items listed below for our Circle Leaders. I will periodically send this kind of e-mail out and hope for the luck and generosity among our community. (Liza, personal communication, October 19, 2011)

Frequently included on this list were requests for both goods (e.g., winter clothes, shoes, underwear, sheets, toothpaste, denture soak, chairs, and DVDs) and services (e.g., haircut, dental implants, fixing a broken weed eater, setting up a new computer).

**Announcements.** Circle meetings always contained a time for announcements. These announcements included announcing and handing out flyers for community events, such as the College and Resource Fair for 8th to 12th graders at Front Range Community College in Longmont, and an upcoming tree-cutting for the holidays at a staff member’s home, as well as requests for help from Leaders and Allies. Furthermore, there is a board above the sharing table that posts job announcements and other information.

**Sitting in a circle for all meetings.** Another structured practice that occurred at all Longmont Circles meetings, and at many other meetings or gatherings of Circles members, was to sit in a circle when gathering as a group (including small groups). As explained above, at the beginning of each weekly community dinner meeting, participants sat together to eat at small round tables. Group members then pulled chairs together to form one large circle, and they began the meeting portion of the evening.

**New and Good.** Another structured Longmont Circles practice was starting every meeting with New and Good. As explained in Chapter 2, New and Good is a time when participants, seated in a circle, share their names and one thing in their lives that is both new and good. For example, the following conversation occurred during one of the meetings (see Appendix K for a complete transcript of this New and Good Session):

Ally A: Well, my New and Good is that I can see. I just had cataract surgery, and it went well, so that's good. I knew I had cataracts and knew they were terrible cataracts, but, and I thought, well, if I could see better for the rest of my life, I might as well start now, so I decided to go ahead. I noticed that my distance vision is quite good now and then I can cover my other eye and things are kind of hazy and dim, but I can see, but if I cover this eye, then it's clear and brighter. So that is amazing. So that is my New and Good.

Various members of the group: Wow. Fantastic. Congrats.

Ally A: My new eye. (Lots of laughter.)

Ally B: Am I next?

Ally A: No, we will go this way [pointing the opposite way around the circle]

Ally C: Well, I'm [Ally C]. I don't know, um, the last few Saturday night, my kids have been showing up for dinner. I just throw a few things together, and we just sit around and talk. It seems like the impromptu times are the best. That's all for me.

The Circles manual identified four reasons for using New and Good:

- For ALL people, we tend to focus on the problems in our life not the positives. New and good contradicts that.
- The process of repeatedly focusing on positive aspects of life teaches us to be in charge of where we put our attention.
- New and Good flattens differences across class lines by introducing people personally instead of by role or status. This facilitates relationship building.
- Using New and Good to start every meeting creates a familiar ritual. Rituals contribute to a sense of community. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 152)

Longmont Circles participants described this practice as “a core part” of Circles. As a Leader asserted, “It’s a way for people to let other people into their lives a little bit, which is nice.” As Ally Phillip explained:

New and Good is when people share a little bit about their lives. I do like it, because it’s really an opportunity for you to hear something about Allies and Leaders’ lives in a way that is just about getting to know that person. So, I think it’s a very simple but effective technique, and even in a group of our size, when we get together on Monday evenings, we can do New and Good in less than half an hour.

**Appreciations.** Similarly, most Longmont Circles meetings ended with Appreciations, which represented an opportunity to thank other participants, with the intention being to “create a ritual that builds community, contributing to the Circles focus on the positive, and reduc[ing]

potential] conflict by creating a culture of generosity” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 155). In Appreciations, first, participants take turns giving a verbal appreciation to the person on their left, and then they receive one from the person on their right. Appreciations are specific verbal acknowledgments of something positive about the person receiving them, but may take different forms during different meetings, with everyone sometimes agreeing to use only a single word—for example, “generous”—but at other times, they can be quite lengthy, involving personal stories and examples that illustrate the positive qualities shared. According to the Circles manual, Appreciations is an exercise in “intentional community building and reciprocity . . . [that is conducted] “as a boost to everyone’s well being” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, pp. 155, 150). The manual noted that “it is amazing to watch the shift in mood that can be caused by this exercise. Try it at home at your dinner table too!” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 155).

**Listening pairs.** Another structured Longmont Circles practice was to share stories, ideas, and information in listening pairs. With a partner, participants split a prearranged period of time (e.g., 5 minutes), and answered a particular question (e.g., “What do you hope your life will look like in 5 years?”) with each other. The listening partner “ONLY listens and doesn’t talk” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 154). The listener may use nonverbal communication, such as “smil[ing], nod[ding], and giv[ing] other non-verbal cues they are paying attention” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 154), but they are not allowed to ask questions, give advice, or direct the conversation in any way. After half the time had passed, the speaker and listener switch roles. Often, pairs were asked to report out to the entire group about what they talked about.

The Circles manual explained the purposes of listening pairs as follows:

Few of us have enough opportunities to be truly listened to without judgment. When we have the space and safety to speak and be listened to without judgment, our own inherent

wisdom emerges. In relationships across class lines, typically the person of higher economic status talks more (gives advice etc.) and the other person listens. Thus, reciprocal listening pairs flatten class differences. Safe self-disclosure with active listening in a relationship builds trust. Listening pairs provide a low-threat way to discuss difficulties (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 154)

Listening pairs were particularly important during training and during the initial Longmont Circles community dinner meetings. For example, listening pairs were used during Ally training as a way of getting potential new Allies to talk to each other, and they typically had participants answer questions such as: What prompted you to get involved in Circles? What is your biggest hope/fear about being involved in Circles? What are the gifts that you bring that will help the Circles community?

**Poverty simulation.** The Boulder County Circles Campaign also borrowed materials and scripts from Circles franchise programs in other states to run an event open to the public called a “Poverty Simulation.” A flyer for the event advertised:

What do people in poverty *really* have to deal with?

Forget the talk, come and experience a simulation that will provide you with a lot of answers to that question. You may be surprised . . . (Circles Poverty Simulation flyer, October 20, 2010).

In that simulation, Leaders and other people living in poverty were paid a small stipend to put on the event by playing roles such as caseworkers, loan collectors, and pawnbrokers. Community members were invited (about 50 people attended) to play the “impoverished” participants. Community members were randomly grouped into families, given new “identity cards,” and asked to “play along” to experience “what it's like to live in poverty” during four 15-

minute “weeks” of negotiating food banks, social services, childcare, public transportation, and other challenges. As Rowland (2011) explained:

During the simulation, participants role-play the lives of low-income families. Some are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families recipients, some are disabled, and some are senior citizens on Social Security. They have the stressful task of providing for basic necessities and shelter on a limited budget . . . [and in doing so,] they interact with human service agencies, grocers, pawnbrokers, bill collectors, job interviewers, police officers and others. (para. 3)

At the end of the hour-long simulation, time was allotted for group discussion and questions and answers.

Rowland (2011) described the goal of the simulation as “enable[ing] participants to look at poverty from a variety of angles and then to recognize and discuss the potential for change within their local communities” (para. 4). With this goal in mind, the simulation “was designed to sensitize those who frequently work with low-income families, as well as to create a broader awareness of the realities of poverty among policymakers, community leaders and others” (Rowland, 2011, para. 4).

**Sharing narratives and/or goals.** Longmont Circles participants also engaged in a variety of narrative and/or goal-sharing practices, typically during community dinner meetings. There were frequent opportunities to share such narratives and goals during Longmont Circles meetings, and many of these opportunities incorporated structured rules for how participants should talk to share those things. For example, one activity designed to engage participants engage in goal setting involves having them complete the following steps:

First, ask yourself the question: If you had a hundred thousand dollars to spend, what would you buy? You can't invest it, pay bills with it or anything like that—you have to spend it just on yourself and the things you want for yourself or your family. Write down at least ten of them. This list represents some of your long term goals; things you want to achieve in your lifetime even just the next twenty years.

Second, imagine that you are successful in taking your life where you want it to go over the next three years. Close your eyes and really imagine meeting yourself three years in the future. Ask your future self some questions:

Where do you live?

What do you drive?

How do you make a living?

What is your yearly salary?

What are your hobbies?

What have you given up, or started doing?

What new skill have you learned?

Write down your answers. These are your short-term goals; the ones you can hope to achieve in a few years time.

Third, suppose you have another hundred thousand dollars—and the stipulation is that you give it all away or use it to help others. What charity or causes would you support? Write it down—these are your goals for helping your fellow man.

Fourth, ask yourself a series of questions and write down the answers; When was the last time you:

Felt successful?

Felt deep happiness?

Felt at peace?

Were really proud of yourself?

Learned something new?

Achieved perfect focus?

Did something you didn't want to do, but did it anyway?

The answers to these questions are your frame of reference. You can work towards feeling the same levels of happiness, contentment, and success in your life more frequently. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, pp. 179–180)

Another commonly method of sharing narratives or goals involved passing out paper and markers or crayons, and having participants draw pictures of their present life or their desired future. After spending about 15 minutes individually drawing these pictures, participants stood up and shared their artwork and goals with the entire group. As the Circles manual explained, “These pictures can be hung in prominent places in your house where you will see them every day. This is a powerful activity for goal setting that can subconsciously boost self confidence and eventually make the dreams into realities” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 180).

Additionally, Longmont Circles participants spent a few community dinner meetings having Leaders create collages of their, as a Leader described, “future story.” Using magazines and other print media, Leaders created artistic depictions representing “what I want my life to be like five years from now.” As Ally Carla explained:

We did a collage that was about where we'll be in the future, five years out. You know, do you see yourself with a new car? Or a new house? Or a new job? So it's not a collage to do a collage; it's a planning and goal-setting activity.

In general, the manual explained that these various sharing activities at community dinner meetings “can create opportunities for relationship building, reciprocity, and movement toward either self-sufficiency or improved financial security” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 179).

**Maintaining a positive orientation to poverty.** Longmont Circles stressed the need to remain positive about poverty, including remaining positive about everyday problems or sporadic crises (the Circles manual called this “focusing on dreams not barriers”; S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 138). The Circles manual reminded participants that “even in a crisis,” they should start with, what have you/we accomplished? What’s going well? Explain that we do this not to ignore the crisis, but to build on strengths and to interrupt the patterns of crisis people get accustomed to. And we actually think about problems better when we first notice our accomplishments and strengths. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 138)

Longmont Circles also focused on a positive orientation to poverty at a macro level by believing that poverty can and eventually will be overcome. The intent of Circles meetings is to “create a community free of poverty, where everyone has an equal chance of having enough money, friends, and meaning (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 141).

### **Less Structured Collective Communicative Practices**

Circles also encouraged participants to interact through some less structured CCPs than those discussed above. These less structured CCPs created opportunities for interactions to occur, but they did not instruct participants on specific ways of communication during those interactions. Six of the 20 CCPs fit in this category: (a) practicing reciprocity, (b) offering public speaking opportunities, (c) regularly scheduling interactions among participants, (d) sharing meals together with other participants and staff, (e) doing recreational activities together, and (f)

engaging in problem solving of obstacles to moving out of poverty. Each of these practices is explained below.

**Practicing reciprocity.** The Circles model is based on people sharing their time, talents, and social support with others. Allies, by volunteering to create intentional friendships with Leaders, give resources to others. In return, Circles asks Leaders to give back to others as well, and it is expected that “over the course of their involvement in Circles,” Leaders will “take a more and more active role in leading their Circle and giving back to the community” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 57). To facilitate that contribution, Circles encourages Allies to invite reciprocity from Leaders. For example, as the manual suggested:

It may often make sense to find a way to support a problem financially. Create a written reciprocity agreement right then and there. For instance, the Circle contributes \$50 to the family to assist in paying the electric bill. Family agrees to help prepare the Circle project’s weekly meal for 5 hours at \$10 per hour over the next month. Giving of one’s gifts, talents and abilities contradicts patterns of victimization. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 144).

Another Longmont Circles practice, and a specific way for participants to give back to others, is the creation and enactment of a “*reciprocity list*” (see Appendix I), where “community members participate in generating meal options, set-up, clean-up, and creation of curriculum for meetings” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 148). Circles explained that it is “crucial that the weekly meetings be a model of belonging and reciprocity,” and that they be designed “to provide people with a structured opportunity to contribute to the meeting going well” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 149).

The reciprocity list is a sign-up sheet that sits on the front table at the start of each meeting, with participants (mostly, Leaders) signing up for various tasks, including “Pick up food,” “After dinner: set up chairs in a circle,” “Introduce New and Good,” and “Review group ground rules.” The Circles manual emphasized that participants should share responsibility for these tasks, and it cautioned that “it is a mistake for the GC Weekly Meeting team or Circles staff to cover these tasks for any but the first few meetings,” because staff, instead, should “be focused on facilitating the meeting, subtly working with Allies and Leaders” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 149). Fostering reciprocity is an important CCP, and “is foundational to community building and human development [because] each of us is needy in some way and each of us has something to give to the other and the community regardless of economic status” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 47).

**Public speaking opportunities.** Another Longmont Circles practice included public speaking opportunities. There were many occasions during weekly meetings/Circles community dinners where participants were asked to address the entire group (e.g., asking for volunteers for unfilled reciprocity list positions; explaining the purpose of New and Good, which typically is done at every meeting; and sharing future dreams or goals).

In addition to these frequent opportunities to speak to the group of participants, Longmont Circles hosted a monthly “Big View meeting,” where community leaders were invited and all participants and guests held a group conversation about “what it means to be economically self-sufficient in one’s community and the pathways to achieve that” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 12). The Big View meeting “is essentially an open house to the community with the goal of illuminating the community about the barriers families face as they become economically stable and eliminating these obstacles” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 228). Big

View meetings have included topics such as transportation barriers and solutions to participants moving out of poverty (e.g., car-donation programs or reduced-cost bus passes), health and nutrition (e.g., cooking healthy meals and eating organically), and government services offered for people living in poverty (e.g., educating participants about the SNAP food stamps program and job-training classes), as well as speakers from Boulder County Human Services, local businesses, and local government offices.

There also were other, albeit less frequent, opportunities through Longmont Circles to speak publically at community-wide functions, such as during the annual Poverty Simulation (explained in Chapter 2), as members of the Guiding Coalition (explained in Chapter 2), or community meetings to inform politicians and policymakers about poverty. As the Circles manual explained:

*People with low incomes must be invited and encouraged to speak out on what it takes to get out of poverty.* The majority of people in decision making positions were raised in the middle and upper classes of our society. They often do not have any understanding of what it is like to live life on the economic cliff. Therefore, the credible and expert voice of people who have, or are, experiencing poverty can have a significant impact on the mindset of those in decision-making roles. Their insights can turn low-impact activities and programs into high-impact ones. Their urgency can help a group of middle-class Leaders move past unnecessary delays caused by fear, power struggles, and cynicism. Low-income Leaders shift the initiative from *doing for* people to *doing with* people and their involvement acknowledges that all members of the community have gifts and talents to share. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 46)

**Regularly scheduled interactions.** Another important Longmont Circles practice included having regularly scheduled interactions with other participants. As explained below, these regular interactions occurred in three forms: Circles community dinners, monthly inner-circle meetings, and monthly Ally support group meetings.

*Circles community dinners.* Explained briefly in Chapter 2, weekly meetings with all Longmont Circles participants, called “Circles Community Dinners” by the Longmont Circles group (Marco, personal communication, March 3, 2011), are the most frequent Longmont Circles practice, occurring every Monday evening from 5:30–7:30 p.m. at a local church. The meetings are structured around 30 minutes of casual dinner, followed by 90 minutes of business conducted with the entire group sitting in a large circle, including: announcements, New and Good, a planned activity, and appreciations, as well as time often reserved for group-level problem solving. According to Circles, “Weekly meetings are the heart of the Circles initiative . . . [representing] a key place where relationships are built, interactions across class lines occur, and people become part of community” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 148). As explained in the Circles manual:

The purpose of these meetings is to build community, peer support and provide a weekly focus on attaining self-sufficiency. It provides Circle Leaders and Allies an informal opportunity to develop relationships and there is a learning component with a curriculum developed by representatives within the initiative. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 148)

An Ally explained that these meetings “are there to keep people connected, to keep all the all the circles connected and to share information about the bigger community.” Another Ally described the multiple purposes of these meetings:

They're for socializing, they're for networking, they're for exploring ideas, they're for sharing success, and maybe even a little bit of problems if you want to share, and then they're ultimately to see the bigger community and how we are all connected and how we can all tap into that.

The second community dinner meeting of each month is scheduled as a Breakout Session meeting, where Allies and Leaders divide into separate groups to discuss challenges and successes of their circles and to sharing strategies to perform better in their particular roles as Allies or Leaders (e.g., building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, fostering open communication, facilitating problem solving of everyday challenges). Occasionally, the two groups reconvened at the end of the meeting to share what they talked about with the entire group.

The fourth community dinner meeting of each month is scheduled as a "Big View Circles Community Dinner," and is open to all members of the public. Big View meetings are designed to create a space where participants can work on macrolevel systemic change in the Longmont community and beyond. In those meetings, "Circle Leaders, Circle Allies, and interested community members meet to affect systems change based on the barriers and roadblocks families and Allies bring to light" (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 12), by exploring precedents and models for how other communities have addressed common problems. The barriers and roadblocks included in those meetings often came from discussions raised in other weekly meetings or from "the Circle Leaders and Circle Allies' concrete experiences, issues raised during Getting Ahead investigations, or agreed-on systems issues identified through local, state, and national associations" (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 12). Big View Meetings are about "gathering data, inviting decision makers to hear from Leaders and Allies, and to congratulate

people for doing the right thing” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 41). They, thus, are designed to be both “*educational* (to change the mind-set of community members) and *results oriented* (to change the goals of the system) with action plans developed to address the systems barriers that families are experiencing” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 12).

***Monthly inner-circle meetings.*** Regularly scheduled interaction occurred during once-a-month “inner-circle meetings,” where participants spent time together working on specific goals set by the circle’s Leader and brainstormed, planned, and implemented possible solutions to obstacles that stand in the way of accomplishing those goals (Marco, personal communication, March 3, 2011). As an Ally explained, these meetings involve “talking, taking notes, and getting to know each other and solve some problems when we can, sometimes sharing resources but not sharing money.” Another Ally noted that the point of these inner-circle meetings is

trying to focus in on the goals of the Circle Leader and looking at what steps need to be taken to achieve those goals, what steps have occurred in the last month, and what that Leader expects to do by the next month.

***Monthly Ally support group meetings.*** Some Allies met as a group with Circles Coach and staff member Liza once a month to discuss common problems and to offer support and solutions. An Ally said that these meetings involved

just talking about what is working and ways to do that is helpful. We talk about the problems that we might have had in the group, [community dinner] meetings, and problem solving. We talk about learning how to better connect with Circle Leaders, and help them to understand that you’re there to help them. And we talk about how they can feel vulnerable with you. And we talk about if they ask what they need, how you can provide the resources or the ideas for how to obtain those resources.

**Sharing meals together.** The practice of regularly scheduled interactions typically worked in conjunction with the practice of sharing meals together. The Circle manual described the purpose of this practice as “ensur[ing] [that] warm and nutritious meals are available every meeting, on time” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 39). In Longmont, these shared meals occurred (and continue to occur) every Monday during the weekly meeting, from 5:30 to 6pm. Local restaurants donate food, and participants serve themselves and sit together to eat at round tables in groups of three to seven people. An Ally described the importance of this practice, saying:

A big part [of Circles] is that we eat together. The food’s not anything fancy but usually it’s quite nice. One night it’s Texas Roadhouse, and I like that the best. Another week it’s Old Chicago, and that’s fine, I’m not big on pizza. . . . During these dinners, everybody sits where they want to, so I try to sit different places with different people, just to get to know some of the other people better. Conversations run the gamut of everything. I would say they’re mostly unrelated to the Circles project; it might be things about their life, about what they’re doing.

At the end of each meal, participants clean off their plates and walk them back to the church’s kitchen in the back of the meeting room, and a participant (usually a Leader who has signed up for this job through the reciprocity list) washes all dishes and utensils.

Occasionally, participants created their own occasions to share meals together by bringing in treats to share, to celebrate birthdays or significant events. For example, one week, an Ally brought in brownies iced in the shape of a house, complete with a grassy yard, to celebrate a Leader’s success in getting a Habitat for Humanity home, which the group dubbed “Brownies for Humanity.”

**Recreational activities.** Often, community dinner meetings involved time for recreational activities, including making crafts—such as chocolate “mice” made of cherries dipped in chocolate, with a chocolate kiss for the head a cherry stem for the tail—or a game night. Leader Carla described some of the deeper educational purposes of the game night:

Sometimes we play games just for fun, and other times we play games that are about learning things. [One community dinner meeting], they brought this card game called “Set” that’s really more like a mind game, a game that’s going to make me think and reflect.

**Problem solving of obstacles to moving out of poverty.** A primary practice of Circles meetings was engaging in problem solving of obstacles—large and small—to moving out of poverty. Allies were reminded to “join with” their Leaders to solve problems and to “let the Leader first tell you what they think will work,” rather than “jump[ing] into problem solving with lots of advice” or “trying to solve the problem [themselves]” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 127). To promote Leader self-sufficiency, Allies were encouraged to ask questions, such as “Can you tell me more about this situation?” “Has this ever happened to you before?” “How did you manage the situation then?” and “Who could help you with this problem?”

Space usually was allotted at weekly Longmont Circles community dinner meetings for problem solving of everyday obstacles, and monthly inner-circle meetings were dedicated entirely to this task. Monthly Big View Circles community dinner meetings were designed to provide a space where participants could work on larger, systemic barriers to helping impoverished community members to move out of poverty.

### **Outcomes of Participation in Longmont Circles**

The CCPs in which Longmont Circles participants engaged had effects on them. As explained in Chapter 3, I collected and documented these effects during participant observations and interviews, and I verified some of these effects the questionnaire responses that participants provided and during additional interviews conducted with them. This subsection identifies many of the observed or expressed effects of these CCPs on some Circles Allies and Leaders, starting with effects at the internal level (cognitive and affective) and moving to effects at the demonstration level (behaviors).

#### **Effects on Participants' Beliefs and Knowledge Base**

First, Longmont Circles practices affected some participants' beliefs and knowledge base. Participating in Circles activities led participants to learn about poverty—both “book-learning” descriptions and theories of poverty from the Circles program and training, and “firsthand perspectives” of poverty from people who live in it. Participants also learned about their community and available resources that it offers to all citizens. Finally, participants learned certain specific knowledge points (e.g., setting goals and stages of group development). As an Ally asserted, “Overall, I feel that I’ve learned a tremendous amount.”

#### **Effects on participants' beliefs about poverty and knowledge about living in poverty.**

Through Circles practices and training, some participants become knowledgeable about different aspects of poverty, including learning about local resources for people living in poverty, being educated about Ruby Payne's (1996; Payne et al., 2006) philosophy of social class, and, for Allies, in particular, what it is like to live in poverty. The questionnaire results reflected these changes in Allies, in particular, as all seven responded that their participation in Circles had increased their knowledge of poverty.

As an example of participants' increasing knowledge of Payne's (1996; Payne et al., 1996) philosophy of social class, Ally Walter explained learning about class-based language differences, a concept from the Boulder County Circles Campaign training based on Payne's observations:

I learned some things about poverty that I wasn't completely aware of, like the language register: formal language and casual. I think that comes more into play with a person in generational poverty, that their [sic] whole life growing up is with the casual register language and they [sic] really don't know how to function with the formal register.

Participants identified this type of knowledge as "book learning," and largely attributed these teachings to "the Circles method" or "the Circles perspective."

As another example of increasing knowledge of poverty, Allies found particular value in the poverty simulation, where Allies and Leaders from the three sites (i.e., Longmont, Lafayette, and Boulder) of the Boulder County Circles Campaign and other community members come together to experience a 2-hour simulation that documented many of the challenges encountered by those living in poverty. Ally Betsy asserted that "Circles has definitely changed my beliefs about poverty," and she explained that

the poverty simulation was absolutely wonderful and eye opening, just to get a feel for what people deal with every day, and the impossibility of getting everything done, and the stress that happens, and all kinds of unforeseen things happening that are out of your control. I've gained a real appreciation for the strength that it takes just to get through every day, just to keep coming.

Additionally, some participants, and particularly Allies with little or no prior experience with people who live in poverty, gained knowledge of what poverty is like directly from those

who live in it. As an Ally explained, Longmont Circles “has given me tangible experience and firsthand knowledge of poverty.” Another Ally said:

Circles has helped me know the reality of poverty, poverty as it actually exists, and knowing the stories of a person in poverty’s life has made me in some ways become more real. I think knowing the stories of a person’s life is important, and has helped to change my perspective. It’s made poverty a little more concrete for me.

Similarly, a Leader explained that one of her Allies, who she described as “really young,” and who “doesn’t know much yet about things,” learned “a great deal” about what it is like to live in poverty. As that Leader explained:

And our relationship is good for her too, because she needs to know what it’s like [to live in poverty], because she comes from like a lot of money. And, it’s good for her to see things that she didn’t see before. And she wants that. And to me, that’s a lot, because she’s willing to learn, and I’m able to show her. So she’s learning from me. She’s learning that everybody’s not like her. And because of that I really like her.

An Ally portrayed this knowledge about poverty as a shift from the “impersonal to the personal,” explaining that “you hear about things in life, about poverty, but Circles makes it real, because it makes it real people, and you think, ‘Oh, this is how it *really* affects someone’.”

Through this increasing knowledge of poverty and through the communication processes employed, Allies described that their understanding of what causes poverty and what keeps people living in it shifted from a focus on individual failings to broader, external systemic issues. This process occurred in two steps.

First, Longmont Circles Allies learned that poverty is a more difficult lifestyle than they previously thought. Through firsthand experience of people living in poverty, Allies came to

understand that a lifestyle in poverty is, in their words, “not easy” and that “people in poverty can’t be lazy, because they have so much stuff to do.” Other Allies described the previously unforeseen or ignored positive characteristics of the Leaders they worked with as necessary to tackle the hardships of living in poverty. Some Allies asserted that living in poverty requires “perseverance” and “tenacity” others identified qualities of “positivity,” “spirit,” and “intelligence to negotiate the complexity of social services” in their Leaders. As an Ally explained, a leader,

who has been trying to get a Habitat home, has put a lot of time and effort into making that happen, and she’s met with obstacle after obstacle. And on top of that, she’s taking care of multiple issues in her life, like working on her credit rating. But just her tenacity with working on all these issues is pretty inspiring. With all this stuff, she’s doing almost more than she has to, and you know, she’s really just got a great spirit about her, and she does it with kindness, you know she’s not bitter, and she’s just like, “This is what I have to do, and I’m going to do it.”

The questionnaire demonstrated Allies’ changing knowledge about poverty. For example, three of the seven Allies (42%) who completed the questionnaire reported that prior to coming to Circles, they believed that “people stay in poverty because they aren’t smart or hardworking as people who do not live in poverty” and because “they make poor choices,” but that they no longer held those beliefs, and that their changing beliefs were caused by being part of Circles. Additionally, four of the seven Allies (57%) reported that prior to coming to Circles, they believed that “in general, most people living in poverty” do not have to deal with a lot of problems, but they now believed, after participating in Circles, that people living in poverty do have to deal with a lot of problems.

Through these interactions, many Allies realized that government systems designed to provide aid and resources to people living in poverty are far more segmented, “difficult to navigate,” and “ineffective” than they previously thought. For example, Ally Phillip expressed his frustration with the multiple and complicated government structures for distributing aid, and explained:

I think that people think you go to one central place, and you get on, what people talk about as “getting on welfare,” and there’s no such thing as that; in reality, its multiple programs in multiple places run by multiple people in multiple agencies that have multiple different kinds of rules and different applications. It’s a total headache. There’s so many different agencies, there’s so many different levels of complexity, so many different levels of government—you know, local government, city government, state government, county government, federal government —and all of the rules don’t make sense and they’re all separate.

The questionnaire also demonstrated Allies’ changing beliefs about government systems designed to aid people living in poverty, with four of the seven allies (57%) reporting that prior to coming to Circles, they did not believe that people living in poverty lacked resources from the government, but not hold that belief.

Additionally, Allies learned that people living in poverty face challenges that are different in the nature of the task, but that are similar in difficulty and in effort required to solve them, to those that they face. An Ally explained that she “just didn’t realize what it takes to live [in poverty].” Another Ally described:

In several stories, I’ve been struck by the tenacity and perseverance that Leaders have demonstrated. And many of them have moved into a point in their life where they’re

moving forward, and they're, you know, doing it, they're getting on a success cycle in their life, and that's wonderful to see. They're kind of going for it, and they're fighting this terrible system, but at the same time they're really working very, very hard, and so I see a lot of similarities there to my own life.

Furthermore, learning that the challenges of an impoverished lifestyle are so difficult was surprising to many Allies. For example, as an Ally explained, "I think it's helped me to change the way I'm thinking, knowing that in some things [Leaders] face the same fears and struggles that I face, and it may not be exact, but its relatively close." Another Ally described "learning that [people living in poverty] had to do so much work just to get by" was a "huge wake-up call" and "really changed the way she viewed [those living in poverty]."

As a result of gaining this knowledge, many Allies gained respect and empathy for people living in poverty, and a new appreciation for the strengths and perseverance that it takes to live in poverty. For example, after months of participating in Longmont Circles, an Ally passionately explained:

Now that I have some experience [with poverty], I can't believe I ever thought of poor people as lazy, or as not having to try very hard. Now I see how unbelievably difficult and unnecessarily complicated our government system is.

Another Ally described this newfound knowledge:

I've learned that there is no "welfare" that people can just mooch off of. Living this way [in poverty] takes a lot of effort. It leaves you tired, and hungry, and depleted, emotionally and physically. Nobody would choose to live this way. And, if you have to, and you're getting by, that shows the depth and strength of your character. That I ever

thought that people would choose this shows how blinded I was, and how out of touch most people are with the reality of poverty.

Allies also gained respect for the effort Leaders put into being a part of the Longmont Circles program and working toward their goals. As an Ally explained:

I'm seeing Circle Leaders who want to feel empowered in their lives and are willing to do things that are hard, and not just [who] want somebody to fix it all for them. And I really respect them for that.

The questionnaire demonstrated Allies' changing perceptions of people living in poverty. For example, three of seven Allies (43%) reported that their beliefs changed from thinking that people living in poverty were not friendly or hardworking before participating in Circles to believing that people living in poverty were friendly and hardworking. Similarly, three of seven Allies (43%) shifted from thinking that people living in poverty were lazy to thinking that they were not lazy, with four of seven Allies (57%) shifting their thinking that people living in poverty were not smart to believing that they were smart.

Second, with a new sense of respect for the difficulty of poverty and for the people living in it, many Allies shifted the focus of their blame for falling into and maintaining an impoverished lifestyle from individual to systemic factors. Allies described coming to a new understanding of not only how "messed up" the "system" is but also how it functions to "keep people who are in poverty in poverty" because complex government structures and systemic issues prevent "escape." Ally Walter described his shift from blaming impoverished citizens' personal choices and effort to, instead, implicating systemic and structural issues. As he explained:

I guess that my tendency before I was involved was to think that it's all their fault if they didn't finish high school, or dropped out, or some other reason that they got into poverty that they should be able to pull themselves out without much help. But I understand better now what some of the problems that keep them there, and how hard it is, and that it's not really their fault.

Similarly, Ally Betsy explained that through her participation in Longmont Circles, she learned that even people that do have stable lives, sometimes they fall into poverty anyway. I didn't realize that happened before. But, I've learned that getting ill or having something—really anything—can push them into poverty, even a single job loss, especially in this economy.

As another example, Ally Kimberly described realizing that people fall into poverty because of “the circumstances in their life that got them trapped,” and began to drop away many of the imagined differences that she had created between herself and people living in poverty. As Kimberly claimed, “I realize now that I'm only different because I've been fortunate in my life that I've haven't had those situations.”

As a result of gaining these understandings about others, poverty became a collective, rather than individual, problem for Allies. Allies explained that poverty is “a community problem” and “something we all have to tackle together, not just something that poor people have to deal with.” Another Ally specifically referenced the shift in his attribution of responsibility for solving poverty:

[Before Longmont Circles], I could ignore poverty, and I chose to do that, and really to make that happen I convinced myself that it wasn't my problem. I looked down on poor people and assumed that they made dumb choices or got themselves into trouble and that

it was their fault for being poor. Though the people [living in poverty] I've met in Circles, I see it's my problem too. I am just as complicit in this poverty problem through my inaction, and I am—we all are—responsible for making it better.

Yet another Ally explained:

I really do believe that we're all here in this together, we're here for each other, and we're not alone. And just staying that to people from the beginning, over time, creates a common vision of togetherness. Poverty is our collective problem, and we will deal with it together.

As a means of helping to solve this “collective problem,” Allies reported increased urgency to work on issues of poverty, and they asserted a newfound need to tell others—especially those with the ability to change existing laws and policies—about what they had learned. For example, an Ally described a point of discussion at a community dinner meeting:

This past meeting, we talked about the possibility of having meetings with elected officials and having a dialogue with elected officials, and having them understand what it means [to live in poverty] and what the particular issues are that people living in poverty face. There's a lot of talk about how we need to let the elected officials know about [these difficulties, including the “cliff effect”], because I don't think they know how extraordinarily difficult things out there are for people who are on the edge.

Another Ally explained, “I tell anyone who will listen about my experiences with Leaders, and I hope to change their perceptions of [poverty]. It is an important issue! People need to care! I hope I can have some impact on that.”

**Effects on participants' knowledge of their community and of community resources.**

The communicative practices employed by Longmont Circles also increased the knowledge and

availability of resources for both Allies and Leaders. For example, Leader Carla described the impact that Circles programming has had on her life:

They teach you the resources that are available to us. They always tell us about scholarships that are available for people going to school, and they bring us all the information the applications and they help me fill it out. And they show me how to go up there myself and find scholarships and grants. Like right now there's this leadership program and it's supposed to be a big deal, so they told us about the program that we can go participate in that, and I never would've heard about it otherwise. So they bring that information to us that I otherwise wouldn't have been able to get a hold of.

Announcements represented a particularly useful part of community dinner meetings for sharing community resources and upcoming events, described by a Leader as “the main way I hear about things that might help me.” Additionally, guest speakers often visited to talk about specific programs or organizations that might benefit Longmont Circles participants. For example, one week, a guest speaker from a local organic farm visited the community dinner meeting to discuss farming practices, internships, and helping set up gardens, and through that, a Leader got involved, now has a small garden, and is growing food. An Ally explained that these guest speakers “offer some very practical help, just helping people make connections that they probably otherwise would have no access to.” Similarly, a Leader described another guest speaker who visited to talk about helping people to better utilize the Boulder County website:

The people from food stamps, they got this program called PEAK, and you can actually apply online for it, you don't have to go in there and embarrass yourself, but we didn't know that. But one of our speakers came and explained it to us all of that, and they came

and showed us how to use the Boulder County website, and showed us a lot of things that we know were on there. So, we really learned a lot about what's out there.

Because of this new knowledge about their community and resources, many Leaders grew in their ability to identify a path of how to get out of poverty and to identify accessible resources that will help them to move along this path.

The Longmont Circles program had a reciprocal effect on community members who are not participating in Circles, but who became aware of the program through their friends, workplaces, or word of mouth. Leader Carla described how this increasing awareness has helped her:

People in the community are learning about Circles, and they are being more sensitive to people who live in poverty because of that. At my job, the chief executive director and people from HR are starting to have meetings about how to help Leaders. So they're starting to open up to it. And, in Boulder County, they're starting to get people to hire people from Circles, and that's huge.

**Effects on participants' knowledge of personal and group processes.** Finally, to a lesser extent, participants learned about many personal and group processes. This knowledge often was relatively shallow and was taught through instances such as a short discussion during a community dinner meeting or from information on a handout (for an example of a meeting handout, see Appendix L). For instance, a community dinner meeting taught participants about setting "SMART" goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. At another meeting, participants learned about the stages of group (circle) development that their small circle was likely to encounter as they grew together. As Ally Betsy explained:

Yesterday, we did an activity where we were looking at a sheet that has where you are in the process of Circles and has different stages of group development, so that was really good to see where different people are at, both Allies and Leaders to understand who is making progress and who might need to work more on their individual groups to build a better relationship.

Participants applied these conceptual teachings to their personal experiences, and, as a result, often framed personal and group processes through these concepts and using newly learned vocabularies. For example, many participants described the progress of their circle as being in a specific stage. For instance, Leader Dawn explained that “we’re stuck in the ‘honeymoon’ stage—it’s all good, but I don’t think we’ll make progress until we’re willing to fight a bit,” and Ally Kimberly said, “My group is really tight, we moved quickly into the ‘working’ stage.”

### **Effects on Participants’ Feelings and Attitudes**

Second, Longmont Circles practices affected most participants’ feelings and attitudes. Many participants reported feeling more positive about the personal successes and even mundane activities of other participants, as well as the successes and activities in their lives. Additionally, many participants reported a general increased feeling of happiness in their lives. Participants also felt more negative about their government and its ability to help citizens move out of poverty or provide resources to facilitate living well on a small income. Allies also reported feeling more thankful for their “good fortune” and resources, and Leaders reported increasing hopefulness that they are on a path out of poverty. Allies and Leaders both reported positive changes in their perceptions of and attitudes towards cross-class others.

**Positive attitudes about successes.** Longmont Circles practices increased some participants’ positive attitudes about personal successes and activities of both Allies and Leaders.

For example, participants viewed mundane events as being more positive or meaningful than before, with a participant saying, “I realize that taking those small steps is huge.” Another participant saw “the small successes a little rosier than before, as more meaningful and important and more, just, needed to be celebrated.” Another Ally asserted that she has “no doubt that Circles help build positivity and encourages being positive about any momentum forward.”

The questionnaire results reflecting this change in Leaders, as four of five Leaders (80%) indicated improvement on the item “Believing I will succeed,” and all four attributing that improvement to their participation in Circles. All Allies who completed the questionnaire reported no difference, although most Allies initially were very high on the scale and, consequently, had little room to indicate improvement.

**Increased happiness.** Other participants demonstrated an increased feeling of happiness. As Ally Josephine exclaimed, “I feel like my life is just so much richer for this, I feel so happy.” A Leader described feeling “a little bit happier in my life, all around, since Circles.”

In particular, many participants attributed this increasingly positive orientation to having learned about other participants’ lives through the practice of New and Good. An Ally explained that New and Good creates “a real sense of bonding,” because “people will share something about themselves, and then others will spontaneously respond, and it builds these real connections.” Ally Kimberly described the Leader in her circle:

New and Good definitely helps her to concentrate on the good things that are going on in everybody’s life. It is helping her to see the good in situations where, otherwise, she might not actually see the good things that are happening in her life.

However, participants asserted that getting to a point of consistent positivity took time. An Ally explained that when

we first started doing New and Good, it was like learning to ride a bike. There are people that do it, and they say something positive, but it's really their negativity coming out, and you can feel that. And, so, it was a process that took awhile to catch on. But to me, it was important to not point their negativity out, because it eventually went away. Over time, when you have people in the group that keep modeling [New and Good] in a real positive fashion, that affects others.

**Negative attitudes about government anti-poverty efforts.** Longmont Circles practices also increased a few participants' negative attitudes about their government and "the system," and its ability to help citizens move out of poverty or to provide resources to facilitate living well on a small income. For example, describing his experiences in Longmont Circles, an Ally, said:

It has made me more angry, especially when I hear ill-informed politicians talking about those who are in "welfare," or when I read editorials or letters to the editor about people who are in poverty and on so-called "welfare." It really makes me quite angry. And I'm more, you know, determined to try and make some political or social changes, or put some effort into trying to make those changes occur, at the political level.

**Allies' increased appreciation for existing resources.** As a result of participating in Circles practices, many Allies also felt increasingly appreciative of and thankful for their "good fortune" and "wealth of resources." An Ally described her thankfulness, and, in doing so, showed her increasing understanding of how those resources contributed to her success:

I think Circles has made me appreciate more all the resources that I do have, and the way that I grew up in a household with a stable income, and now, that I'm not living in debt and not living in a poverty situation. I realize now all the resources that I had that

contributed to me being able to go to college and get a degree and pursuing a career. I've learned that if you don't have those resources, your chances of being able to pursue higher education are so much less, and that makes it a lot more challenging. It does help me to see just how valuable a good education is. I see how valuable it is to have sufficient resources, such that you can take 15 months to find a job that is a good fit, and to not have to take a minimum wage job to pay the bills. And, most importantly, to have good health care coverage, knowing that one illness is not going to make or break you, and that you can take care of your body and have the test done. And, just in general, not having it be a complete crisis if a car breaks down, or being able to easily fix it if things go wrong. To have the resources to know people to come put on a new spare or go buy a new tire, and to take for granted all the insurance plans and all the things that we have in place, like calling AAA. We take it all for granted.

**Leaders' increased hopefulness.** Additionally, Circles practices that contribute to Leaders' growing knowledge and existence of resources necessary to move out of poverty helped these Leaders to feel hopeful that they are "on a path" out of poverty. Allies occasionally wondered whether this new hopefulness was based on real progress or on unfounded expectations, but explained that, regardless, it contributed to Leader positivity and self-confidence. As an Ally explained:

Having an idea about how to get out of poverty, in some ways, helps [my Leader] a little because it gives him a sense of hope. Now, whether that's a false hope or not I don't know, that's not for one person to say about another person's life, to judge another person's life. But in some ways, if it gives him hope, even if it's the most grandiose ideas, then it might make his life a little more bearable. Maybe that will take him to

another place, and maybe this is a way that he gets to a place where he gets to a point of making realistic goals. He needs to feel better about his life and about his self, in general, if he's going to get there, and those grandiose ideas might actually be of benefit there.

**Changing perceptions of cross-class others.** Allies and Leaders both reported positive changes in their perceptions of and attitudes toward cross-class others. In particular, the Allies reporting positive changes thought more highly of people living in poverty, and the Leaders reporting positive change saw people who do not live in poverty as being less judgmental than they had believed before participating in Longmont Circles.

Allies commonly reported that their perceptions of people living in poverty changed for the better because of their participation in Circles. As an Ally put it:

When I meet with [Leaders], I'm so impressed, and, I hate to say it, but sometimes surprised that these people are totally focused, dedicated, and then they're ready to have fun, too.

Other Allies spoke about being "pleasantly surprised" or "wowed" that Leaders had surpassed their usually low expectation of the skills and motivations of people living in poverty. Some Allies described feeling guilty for holding such "negative" perceptions of poor people before Circles.

Many Leaders also changed their perceptions of cross-class others; in this case, people who do not live in poverty. Leaders overwhelmingly explained that, before Longmont Circles, they typically "avoided wealthy people when possible" because they "disliked" and, in some cases, "resented" the judgmental attitudes that they perceived most people not living in poverty to hold towards the poor. However, participating in Longmont Circles and interacting with middle and upper class Allies on a regular basis overturned these beliefs and improved Leaders'

perceptions of people not living in poverty. Many Leaders explained that they were, as one put it, “very surprised [to learn that] some—maybe even a lot—of middle-class people or wealthy people actually don’t see themselves as that different from those of us that are struggling.”

Another Leader said:

My Allies were there to support me. I didn’t think they would, because they had never lived the life that I had [in poverty]. But they didn’t judge me, and that was surprising. So [through Circles] I learned that things could be like that.

In fact, most Leaders agreed that Longmont Circles interactions were the first time that they did not feel judged by people who did not live in poverty.

Shifting these perceptions, even within participants of the group, took time. According to a Leader:

It was several weeks for me to get over being nervous around Allies; it really took time. But [the Allies] really made us [Leaders] feel like we were important, and there wasn’t any judgment. It was how they carried themselves, how they presented themselves, and there was no judgment bone in their body, and that really helped build our [Leaders’] confidence.

In both cases, these shifting attitudes originally were constrained to the cross-class others within the Longmont Circles group, and eventually extended to cross-class others, in general. A Leader described that she “looks at all wealthy people differently now,” and, similarly, an Ally reported that his feelings of compassion and “deep sense of respect” extended to “just about all the low-income people” he encounters, because he now knows “just how much it takes to live in an everyday struggle.” Similarly, a Leader explained that

by meeting people more often like my Allies, and like my boss at work, I know now that there are people out there that are different. Even though they don't really know what it's like [to live in poverty], they have the heart to help, and I realize that some of them, they actually care. You think that they don't want to help, or you think they must be so tired of people reaching out to them, but many actually do want to help.

These shifting attitudes toward others are significant, and, as discussed in the next chapter, represented an important groundwork for community building and social change.

Many participants pointed to an activity used at the first few community dinner meetings that involved separate breakout groups of Allies and Leaders discussing their worries as an significant foundation for their shifting perceptions of the differences between the groups, and as a first “inkling that there might be more similarities between us than we thought.” A Leader described this activity and its impact on her fears about the Circles process:

During the very first meeting, we separated into two groups, and the Allies got together and wrote down their worries and concerns, and the Leaders did the same thing [separately]. Then we came together and shared them between the two groups. I think that was very helpful, because to see what people wrote was very insightful and relatable. So, I think that, from a Leader's point of view, when we were able to see what the Allies worried about too, and it was the same exact thing that we were worried about, things like, ‘Wow, are they going to trust me?’, ‘Will they take a chance with me?’ and to go, ‘Oh, Allies are worried about that too?’ makes it feel so much less intimidating for us.

The questionnaire results reflected that participants increasingly believed that all people have worries and insecurities. Specifically, four of five Leaders (80%) and three of seven Allies (43%) indicated shifts in their perceptions of this item, from before Circles compared to now.

### **Effects on Participants' Skills**

Third, Circles practices affected some participants' communication and cognitive skills. Specifically, participants improved their communication competence, interactional competence, and cognitive abilities, such as long-term planning, analytic thinking, and sustained attention.

**Effects on participants' communication skills.** Circles practices had direct and important impacts on most participants' communication skills and interactional competence. Over the months of participant observation in which I engaged, I saw Allies and Leaders alike improve their confidence and abilities to express themselves in front of the group, and grow as listeners, storytellers, problem-solvers, and empathizers. In turn, the group became a more warm and comfortable climate for members to practice new forms of communication (e.g., speaking in public, telling personal stories and narratives, and sharing their goals and dreams).

**Improved ability to talk with others about community or personal issues.** Questionnaire data showed that some Longmont Circles Leaders reported becoming better at "speaking with others about personal issues" (e.g., personal struggles) and "speaking with others about big community issues" (e.g., politics and current events), with four of five Leaders (80%) reporting improvements for both of these items.

**Improved listening skills.** Some Longmont Circles participants reported becoming better listeners. The questionnaire results indicated that four of five Leaders (80%) and two of seven Allies (29%) improved their listening skills and attributed that improvement to their participation in Circles. Responses from some participants who did not indicate improvement in listening skills on the questionnaire (five of the six participants in that subset; 83%) revealed that they already had the highest category ("GOOD!") of listening skills and, hence, there was no room for improvement.

***Improved public speaking skills.*** Participating in Longmont Circles also improved some Leaders' public speaking skills. As an Ally said:

You've got people often standing up to speak, and that is a really good thing to do, just on a public speaking level, because for some people, that can be really intimidating. And the more you do it, the better you get. Even in less than a year, I've seen people drastically improve.

Leaders demonstrated particular improvements in their communicative behaviors related to *telling stories* and *sharing personal narratives*, an outcome that likely was influenced by the frequency with which Allies were encouraged to share their stories and narratives in weekly meetings, and by the support that they received from doing so from other participants. The questionnaire results reflected this change in Leaders' skills, with four of five Leaders (80%) indicating improvement, and all four attributing that improvement to their participation in Circles. All Allies who completed the questionnaire reported no difference.

***Increased interactional competence.*** Longmont Circles also increased some participants' *interactional competence*, proficiency in the skills needed to interact with others, which is defined as "the ability of a person, in interactional situations to carry out and interpret verbal, paralinguistic, non-verbal and extraverbal communicative actions in two roles, that of the speaker and that of the hearer, according to the sociocultural and psychological rules of the group (Oksaar, 1990, p. 530). Interactional competence "involves knowing and using the mostly-unwritten rules for interaction in various communication situations within a given speech community and culture...[and] includes, among other things, knowing how to initiate and manage conversations and negotiate meaning with other people [and] knowing what sorts of

body language, eye contact, and proximity to other people are appropriate, and acting accordingly” (Summer Institute of Linguistics International, 1999, para. 1).

Many Leaders and Allies alike improved their interactional competence through the process of interacting with others in the group. For example, in general, Leaders learned to speak more directly to their needs and goals, and less about reasons for needing or aspiring to those things. As a Leader said, “I learned when I’m late for work, I shouldn’t give the whole laundry list of reasons and excuses I usually feel like I ‘gotta give out.” She explained that she learned this lesson, in large part, from her Allies telling her that “it’s okay to be late a few times a year,” and that excuses are not required and may negatively affect others’ perceptions of her. As she said:

One of the people I’m working with, I was trying to teach her that when someone says, “Can you make it?” and you can’t or don’t want to, you do not have to go into a whole litany of things to justify your whole life or entire schedule, because that is none of their [sic] business. And you’ll be in a much more powerful position if you don’t. And I thought that when I was a kid or when I was a certain age, I used to do that, because I didn’t know better. So I’ve been working with [this Leader], teaching her you have absolutely nothing to apologize or defend. And especially with wanting to step into being a businessperson, all you have to say is, “My schedule is open on this day at this time, or this other day at this time,” that’s all you have to say.

The questionnaire data reflected these improvements for some participants, as five of seven Allies (71%) reported increased ability to communicate with people who are living in poverty. Similarly, all five Leaders (100%) reported increased ability to communicate with people not living in poverty.

Gaining interactional competence had important implications for Leaders, in particular, who need to be able to display skills necessary to express themselves clearly, initiate conversations, and negotiate, as they may be disadvantaged by the social and economic structures that make their everyday interactions more difficult. An Ally highlighted the importance of interactional competence for people living in poverty:

It's important even than I realized, getting the skills to...talk to others in more assertive ways. People are more likely to get taken advantage of by people who they think are poor or uneducated, so I think that [learning these skills] puts [people living in poverty] in a much stronger, more powerful position.

Similarly, another Ally shared:

I've heard a lot of stories, Leaders explaining how they get overlooked by important people who they need to talk to: business people, cops, their kids' teachers. And it's just because people get a sense that they're poor, maybe because they don't dress as well [as others] or don't talk as confidently, so they think they're unimportant, so they ignore them. And that brings on this cycle where Leaders expect to get ignored, so they don't ever really learn the skills for how to talk to those people. So part of our job here [in Longmont Circles] is to help [Leaders] relearn how to [interact] with others, and that small skill will help improve their lives in huge ways.

Many participants also learned about normative ways of interacting with others in specific contexts, such as in the workplace. For example, Leader Carla described how her Allies “tell me things like that I can go in and negotiate salary,” or, when interviewing,

about how I should prepare to be competitive for that job. They give me feedback [about my job], because, being that they are in the positions that they are, they know what works in that environment that I don't know.

Allies described, as one put it, learning about "how to better interact with people who don't have a lot of means," and a Leader cited "learning things that I didn't know about what is appropriate to talk about in different situations."

**Effects on participants' cognitive skills.** Some participants also reported increases in their and others' cognitive skills, such as long-term planning, analytic thinking, and sustained attention. As an Ally explained, "I've noticed certain shifts going on with [Leaders'] planning abilities. I'm definitely seeing progress and I'm seeing their long-term thinking skills really improving." Another Ally said that her Leader "has gotten so much better at making multi-step progress towards goals" and now "can tackle much more all at once." Another Leader agreed, describing how she has gained "the skills needed for business, like being able to plan ahead and focus on lots of complex things at once," and that she credited this shift in her cognitive ability to "mentally moving out of the crisis mode of poverty, where you're constantly putting out immediate fires and have no time to think ahead."

### **Effects on Participants' Self-Esteem and Feelings of Empowerment**

Fourth, the Boulder County Circles Campaign provided opportunities for many participants to empower themselves and build their self-esteem and confidence. As a result of these opportunities and their effects on their changing knowledge base, feelings, and skills, Longmont Circles participants reported feeling empowered to make positive changes in their lives that they had not thought possible before joining Circles. Furthermore, in doing so, Longmont Circles positively affected cross-class interpersonal relationship development.

In general, the questionnaire results verified this change in Leaders, with four of five Leaders (80%) indicating improvement on the item “Believing in myself,” and all four attributing that improvement to their participation in Circles. Allies, however, showed no difference, although most Allies started out very high on the scale, and as such, had little room to show improvement.

Most Longmont Circles participants described Circles practices as creating opportunities for people to empower themselves and to build self-esteem and confidence in their capabilities. For example, the reciprocity list was way for participants to show their commitment to Longmont Circles by donating their time and effort in small ways—such as conducting announcements, leading appreciations, or greeting people as they enter weekly meetings—that had the added benefit of being an opportunity to practice skills (e.g., interactional skills and public speaking skills) and to build interpersonal relationships. An Ally explained that the reciprocity list “allows Circle Leaders a place to give back to others without using money, and to be in control of their own meeting.” Furthermore, by taking on small, voluntary leadership roles through the reciprocity list, participants created opportunities to practice leading cross-class others in a low-risk, supportive climate, an opportunity that they might not have had outside of Longmont Circles.

As another example, time for interacting with Allies and problem solving of everyday issues helped people to empower themselves to build confidence and tackle problems on their own. As a Leader explained:

My Allies have really helped me learn to work through the system, and learn to believe in myself, because there have been a lot of times when I haven’t known what to do. So [Circles] has really provided me with better resources, and opportunities to practice

fixing things, and [through that] has made me better able to resolve all my issues, instead of sitting there and just taking it. You know, if [human services employees] treat me wrong or if they don't respond to me, I can now stand up for myself to fix it. If that doesn't work, I know people who got my back.

Another Leader described that "it is not a "do as I say" philosophy, rather one of empowerment and one that I believe will actually work."

Additionally, the particular *structure* of Circles provided many opportunities for participants to empower themselves. For example, there were many opportunities to speak publically through Circles, whether sharing goals with the large Longmont Circles group or discussing problems with the Longmont transportation system to community leaders. As an Ally explained:

Giving [Leaders] the opportunity to have their voice heard is so important. People just don't know what it's like, and Leaders want to share, but they really don't have any opportunities to do it. Circles provides those [opportunities], and that helps [Leaders] speak out and get their points out there.

Another Ally agreed, saying:

As far as what I think works and why it works, it's not like one specific activity; it's about the structure of the meetings. I think that combined with how the meetings are run, you can't run it like a corporate meeting, for example, because then people would feel marginalized, and shut out, unable to speak up. But the way we structure things here, there are lots of opportunities for Leaders to talk and share and, well, shine.

Another Ally spoke similarly about the potential for Leaders to empower themselves through public speaking opportunities at Big View meetings:

I've been at a couple of Big View meetings where Leaders from the community come in—you know, like social services, housing, community programs—and certainly they're actively seeking the input of Circle Leaders. I think that's very empowering. They're very respectful and open to hearing what the Circle Leaders have to say, and I think that's extremely beneficial for these individuals.

As another example, Circles asked participants to take on new roles. Leaders are asked to take on leadership roles that they might not otherwise enact (e.g., taking on the responsibility of leading a team of Allies and managing the success of that team). Allies are asked to form alliances—not as mentors or teachers but as something more than friends—where they offer informational, social, and emotional resources to relative strangers, and they are expected to support these strangers in their efforts to move out of poverty. Taking on these new roles often required participants to interact with others in new, and occasionally unfamiliar, ways, and to take on new responsibilities. Doing so sometimes led to participants experiencing frustration at their inability to easily negotiate these roles or anxiety at their potential failure. More often, however, participants learned to take risks (e.g., having frank conversations about money or disclosing sensitive personal information) that led to positive outcomes (e.g., learning new ways to deal with financial issues and increased closeness with others).

As such, in these new roles, many participants had the potential to empower themselves to take on new identities and new ways of communicating. As a participant described, "Being an Ally has allowed me to use parts of myself that I've really wanted to do." Another Ally spoke about having an opportunity to share knowledge about parenting with a Leader, even though she had never been a parent herself:

Now, I'm not a mother, so I found it really interesting that I had something to share for someone who is a mother, but I learned that I do have some things to share that actually were really helpful. I feel confident in sharing these things, these new sides of me.

The language engaged in by Circles' participants and staff members (e.g., "Circle Leaders" and "Allies") certainly contributed to solidifying these roles, and Longmont Circles provided many opportunities where people could practice skills and interactions to, ideally, build confidence in their capabilities. Individuals who took advantage of those opportunities often reported feeling more confident, "brave," and empowered; as a Leader said, "I guess it helps being called a leader by others because that makes me feel like I really am a leader in my life."

Additionally, the Circles goal of encouraging Leaders to one day become Allies was a frequently mentioned source of hope and self-confidence, in that Leaders felt that they could contribute to changing middle-class apathy by one day becoming a member of the middle class who does care. As Leader Carla explained:

I feel more self-confident through Circles. It's helped me see that I can be one of them [a middle-class person]. And I know what I'm going to do when I'm one of them: I'm going to care. I'm going to be an Ally.

Similarly, Leader Thomas asserted:

When I'm on a better path to getting out of poverty, when I make that happen, then I'll become a Leader, and my Allies will become—how do I say it?—my comrades, my compatriots, *mi amigos*. I look forward to that day.

Leaders, in particular, described feeling empowered by Longmont Circles practices to make positive changes in their lives. Often, these changes occurred in the way that Leaders perceived themselves. For example, a Leader asserted, "Circles has changed the way I view

myself. I now believe that I am valuable.” Similarly, Leader Carla said, “My Allies are helping me be more assertive, more confident, and because of that, I feel more positive about things, about my life.”

Many Leaders also described feeling empowered by building confidence in their capabilities to interact with others competently and with conviction. For example, a few participants described an ability to confidently negotiate business transactions that they had not felt prior to beginning Longmont Circles. As a Leader indicated:

I’ve become more self-confident by working with my Allies and through the opportunities I’ve been in through Circles. I’ve learned to speak up for myself, to stand my ground. In some situations, I’m still self-conscious, like, especially around people with money. But even then, I’ve learned to stand up for myself and say, “No, I’m not going to be treated like this, I’m a business owner! I’m a mom! I’m a proud female! I don’t care what you say, because what I demand is respect!” Five years ago, I wouldn’t have been like that. By learning that, I’ve been able to overcome hurdles that otherwise I would have thrown my hands up at.

As another example of Leader empowerment, Leader Carla described a situation where she paid a significant amount of money for a company to come in and fix her caving kitchen floor. A few months later, the floor began to cave in again in the same area. Carla did nothing, and explained, “I didn’t do anything about it, because I didn’t know that I could.” However, her new Allies encouraged her to contact the company and to insist that it come back to fix the failed repair job. Carla did, but was not able to talk the company into coming back to repair its faulty job; after a few attempts, the floor company soon stopped taking her calls. She told her Allies about the continuing problem and they encouraged her to take action, insisting that she talk to the

company in person. Carla, again, took their advice, and brought along one of her Allies with her to the company, where they successfully negotiated that the company would come back and complete the repair work free of charge. Carla was very proud of her success, stating emphatically, “My Allies are very supportive, and through them I have become brave. They teach me how to go about doing something, and I learn that I can do it on my own. That I won’t get walked on.”

Similarly, Longmont Circles practices were integral to Mary starting her business. The seeds for this business, and the confidence to believe that she could make it happen, came from interactions that she had early in the Circles program, when the group was discussing the upcoming Christmas party. As Mary told the story:

We started talking about the decorating for the Christmas party and my eyes just lit up, and I asked, “Ooohhh, can I do the decorating?” I felt like the group just pulled something out of me that nobody had a clue. Including me, it was something I loved, but had forgotten about.

Decorating for the party grounded Mary’s desires in real experience, and, as she said, “showed me that I could do something well.” Soon after, she started to express her interests in decorating to the group. As she related:

It took a lot of confidence to tell people, because [decorating] was one of the things that was shot down before, like 10 years ago, by these people who shot down all my earlier ideas. But the group didn’t shoot down my ideas. They [sic] said, “Hey, if that’s what you want to do, you need to go for it!” and that gave me more confidence. Then people started saying that I should go into business for myself. Eventually, things evolved to

what my business is now, but had I not expressed my desire, and had people not responded to me like they did, I wouldn't be here.

Mary described feeling empowered from this support and encouragement:

It helped build my self-confidence to have people in Circles who actually believe in me and encourage me to be who I am, and, basically, with that encouragement and support, bringing out the strengths in me.

Leaders also empowered themselves by gaining confidence to choose the types of people and interactions in which they engage in, and by rejecting those people and situations that they do not feel will lead to positive interactions. For example, speaking about her time before Longmont Circles, Leader Mary said:

It used to be really hard for me to be around middle-class people and upper class people, because I thought that they're 'gonna judge. It's easier to be around people in poverty, because they got problems too [laughs], so they're not going to judge.

Participating in Longmont Circles helped Mary to empower herself to look beyond others' expressions of judgment and, if she so desired, to choose not to engage in that interaction. As Mary explained:

Now, being in Circles, I've learned that there's still going to be judging; there's always 'gonna be judging in any place in life. I know that now. But I've learned that people who are judging aren't the people that I want around me, and I've learned that I can choose not to surround myself with that. Instead, I'll put people around me that will encourage me and lift me up. I think that's the key.

In some situations, these feelings of disempowerment and fear of rejection and judgment prevented Leaders from making friends with those who did not live in poverty, or even led them

to dismiss potentially beneficial personal or job opportunities. For example, a Leader described how her fear of being judged on the cleanliness of her house—which she perceived as being in a constant state of disarray, but between working multiple jobs and caring for her child, she never had time to “properly clean”—prevented her from inviting people who did not live in poverty into her home. Another Leader had such severe anxiety about being judged or rejected by her “wealthy” coworkers that she frequently thought about quitting her job. She talked openly in Longmont Circles meetings about how she felt that her company had “made a mistake” in hiring her and expressed deep worry that her employers would “find out” that she was poor. Each time that she convinced herself quitting was the best way to overcome her fears, she shared her plan with her Allies and other Longmont Circles participants, who helped her to overcome those worries and to build confidence in herself, and perform successfully in her job.

Some Allies also described growing feelings of empowerment in the Leaders with whom they worked, describing Leaders’ “growing self-confidence,” increasing “strength of conviction,” and “belief in self.” As an Ally explained:

Before, [the Leader] would talk about doing things, but not actually do them. I didn’t know her then, but this is what was told to me. But now, she feels so empowered. I think it’s because people believe in her.

This Ally attributed the success to the program, exclaiming, “I truly feel that Circles made all the difference here.”

Allies also felt empowered through Longmont Circles practices. As Ally Pam asserted: I learn a lot from this Circles process by observing other people and getting ideas about how I can better ask for what I need, and growing in my confidence to do that. As I’m getting to know people in this group, I’m realizing that it can be about me too.

Other Allies empowered themselves by serving as agents of change, or as a positive part of a bigger system that enables change. As an Ally explained:

It makes me feel good to make a difference in someone's life, to know that I have the ability to help others succeed. To see [my Leader] succeed is really rewarding, even though I don't help her all that much since she is so self-motivated. But getting to celebrate those achievements with her is really rewarding. I feel good about myself knowing that, in a small way, I was a part of that.

Ally Kimberly may have put it best when she asserted, "It has made me see that it is possible to reach out and engage people from all parts of the community and be a part of solving poverty."

### **Effects on Participants' Interactions and Interpersonal Relationships**

Fifth, Circles practices affected participants' interactions and interpersonal relationships. Through Circles practices, participants become increasingly disclosive and open in their communication with other participants, and gain empathy for the lived experience of the other. As a result, Longmont Circles builds intimacy between participants and builds high-quality interpersonal relationships, expanding participants' social circles.

**Encouraging open communication and disclosure.** Circles practices encouraged open communication and disclosure among most participants. The questionnaire data showed that some Longmont Circles' participants became increasingly willing to share about themselves with other participants, as four of five Leaders (80%) and five of seven Allies (71%) reported an increased willingness to share their success with other participants. Similarly, four of five Leaders (80%) and two of seven Allies (29%) demonstrated an increased willingness to share their fears or failures with other participants.

Some participants also spoke about these improvements during interviews. For example, a Leader said:

I've been opening up to my Allies about things that I wouldn't have before, and that's because I feel I can trust them. I feel it's also because I know that they really want to help me. They really do. I mean they do. They care.

An Ally reported that she felt it has been "so interesting to learn all things that we connect on, to see some of the synchronicities that show up," and, as a result, that "it has been a very heartwarming, very connecting, very bonding type of experience."

Leaders also reported being more disclosive about difficult topics, such as money troubles, parenting woes, or personal failures. For example, the questionnaire data showed that most Longmont Circles Leaders who completed the questionnaire reported becoming better at "talking to others about money." Four out of five Leaders (80%) reported improvements on this item. As another example, a Leader explained how she has improved her ability to discuss financial troubles:

I've gotten better about talking about money. Before, I wanted to hide it and not tell anyone. Before [Longmont Circles], when people asked me to do things, I would just be like, "I'm sorry I'm busy." Like when people would be like, "Do you want to go out to dinner?" I would just look at them and be like, "Yeah right!" But now that shame is gone, and I'm even more open with my Allies. I can talk to them and say, "Ok I've got a shutoff notice. What do I do?" and they say, "Have you called the company? Can you try to get an extension?" and then they try to help me find ways that I can do to change the situation. So I'm not embarrassed to tell them things, even really personal things, or financial things.

Another Leader, Mary, explained how learning to be disclosive with her Allies “took a lot of time,” but that now she feels comfortable sharing “a lot” with them. She described her initial difficulty in disclosing as a big hurdle in her relationship with her Allies, and explained

You know, admitting that I need help has been a big thing. Even admitting that my house is a mess is a big deal, because before, I would have never let my Allies come in here before. So, having that ability to open up and admit that I’m undisciplined about this or whatever is huge.

Similarly, another Leader explained how her Allies sharing ideas and resources to improve her ability to get a promotion at work was a significant turning point in their relationship and, as a result, in her willingness to disclose and to accept others’ help. The Leader said that this sharing of information “has helped me open up more, and understand that these people really are like me, you've just got to talk to them.”

Many Leaders claimed that Circles practices (e.g., New and Good, and sharing goals and dreams) contributed directly to their willingness to disclose. Others, such as Ally Walter, attributed the increasingly disclosive environment to the particular structure of Longmont Circles, explaining, “the way the group runs meetings is to be inclusive and to help bring people out and feel comfortable being who they are, and eventually people do.” A Leader added that, in meetings,

we find a common ground for doing things. It’s not just my way of doing things, or your way, it’s not a that we use a middle class way or a rich way or a poor way. We take a new path, we’re willing to try out new things.

However, communication is not always completely open right away, with Allies and Leaders alike asserting that it takes time and bravery to move past traditional barriers to

disclosure. Ally Pam recounted how a Leader was debating getting a car loan for her granddaughter, explaining that the Leader “felt good that her credit was good and she could do something good for her granddaughter.” However, Pam had concerns about the Leader making this serious of a purchase without enough financial backing, recounting, “I thought, ‘Oh no,’ and so I brought up in the Ally meeting that I was a little concerned that it could impact her business.” Other Allies responded that she should bring it up to the Leader, but she never did, explaining that

I didn’t feel like I was invited to talk to [the Leader] about that, and I was concerned that it didn’t feel like my business. It felt too much like I had an agenda I was pushing on her, like I knew what was right and was telling her that she didn’t. So I chose not to say anything. So it’s going to have to come up in a different context; she will need to ask for advice about this before I’m willing to respond. The empowerment comes from the asking. And she hasn’t yet, and that is totally fine. Maybe she will in the future.

Other Allies felt uncomfortable discussing or asking others questions about particular topics (e.g., money). For example, Ally Walter described feeling “invasive” when struggling with the tension between disclosure and protectiveness:

Sometimes I feel uncomfortable when I feel like I’m prying in their personal lives, but I can’t help them if I don’t know what’s going on. Even though it’s uncomfortable, you’re sort of obligated to delve into some personal situations, and I generally get positive responses, even when I feel like I’m prying.

Regardless of topic, time helps, and over time, communication among participants became more open and more intimate, and participants reported that they feel they have “bonded together.” As an Ally explained, “Over time, I’ve seen the Leaders really start to speak up, and

seen their different personalities pop up. I think they're less concerned about making a misstep or saying the wrong thing."

**Fostering empathy for the lived experience of the other.** Learning more about participants' lives, personalities, and experiences helped the group members to, as an Ally described, "grow empathy for each other and a develop sense of purpose." As a Leader said:

The more we talk and get to know each other personally, it's like I walk in her shoes and she walks in mine. Sometimes we see that it's not always like the grass is greener on the other side. Sometimes we see that we're not so different. Other times we see that it's harder than we thought to walk in the other person's shoes. Even for me, I never thought that rich people had it rough before. But now, I know that everybody has hard times, no matter how much money you have.

The questionnaire data reflected these improvements, as two of five Leaders (40%) and five of seven Allies (71%) reported an improvement in "being empathetic," which was described as "thinking about how the other person feels."

Many participants identified communicating openly, disclosing honestly, and listening without judgment as important tools for developing empathy. As an Ally noted:

Even though I think I've always been empathetic and caring, I've learned to be even more understanding of others. When I sit with a Circle Leader that I'm working with and building this friendship with, I know how important it is that I look at the world through their [sic] eyes.

Another Ally described how this open communication, in combination with newly acquired knowledge about the lived experience of others, changed her perspective and grew her feelings of empathy:

Circles has just increased my awareness; it has given me more insight and empathy, and brought me deeper into understanding everything. You can only learn more, understand more, and appreciate more when you are faced with this in a real world. I mean, you can have book knowledge, you can think you know things, but when you actually experience it with someone, like you're walking with them [sic], their [sic] path, their [sic] journey is going to impact the way you behave, because you're going to slow down a little, you're 'gonna look at them differently, you're going to think more with where they're [sic] at, and view the world through a different lens.

**Building interpersonal relationships between participants.** Through practices that encourage open communication, self-disclosure, and empathy, among other things, Longmont Circles built high-quality interpersonal relationships between most participants. Many participants described other Longmont Circles members as friends. Leader Delores said simply, "I've made a lot of friends," and Ally Connie said, "I think that the biggest value of Circles is friendship, and that is totally the first thing that has to happen, so it was the first thing we really built."

Additionally, most participants cited the friendships and interpersonal relationships built through Longmont Circles as their favorite part of the program, and the primary thing that keeps them returning to the group week after week. As an Ally explained, "It has actually felt very magical to me in terms of the connections I've built with others in Circles."

Furthermore, many participants and staff described the interpersonal relationships built through Longmont Circles as integral to its success and as paving the way to other positive changes, such as increasing positivity, social support, and self-confidence. For example, an Ally asserted:

What's working is that our circle has a great relationship, and because of that great relationship, the Circle Leader is feeling supported enough to move ahead, and she's doing really well in the eyes of her Allies and I think in her own eyes.

Speaking about the broader Boulder County Circles Campaign, Circles Coordinator Marco said:

What I've seen here, and nationally too, is that what is working well is the relationships. I hear a lot that the relationships are really succeeding. It's not that people say what is working well is, "Oh, I've got a new job" or "I finished this degree," even when those things are happening, and they are. Instead, what I heard over and over again was, "This relationship is really working," "We love each other," and "My Allies are wonderful and we have so much in common." Seems that people talk about the relationships [they've formed through Circles] almost more than anything else, even more than their personal success or their progress out of poverty—[which were] the things that brought them to Circles in the first place.

Some participants reported that Circles practices have affected their relationships with people who do not participate in Circles. For example, an Ally described how watching a Leader "stand up" to negative forces in their lives and "be strong in the face of stress" positively affected her ability to feel empowered to improve her own existing relationships:

Participating has actually affected my relationship with others; for example, getting me rethinking how I relate to my ex[-husband], because I feel like [in that relationship], I was so careful not to say or do anything I would regret. It wasn't that [my ex] is a terrible person but I didn't stand up for myself in that relationship. So it's another example of observing how someone else, like [a Leader], is taking small steps in their [sic] lives and by me being in this program and hearing about what they [sic] are doing, I

can learn and grow as well. And while I'm not comparing my situation to theirs [sic], I'm relating to finding these strengths in myself. I find myself asking, "Why is it that I feel that [standing up for myself to my ex] such a terrible thing to do?" So in that way, Circles is kind of like therapy, but it's not too threatening! [Laughs]

**Building participants' social circles.** As a result of these new interpersonal relationships, Longmont Circles expanded many participants' social circles. The questionnaire data reflected these changes, as all five Leaders (100%) and six of seven Allies (86%) reported increases in their "social network of people willing to help" them. The Circles weekly meetings played an important role in this social circle expansion for Leaders, in particular, as all five Leaders (100%), as compared to zero Allies, agreed with the statement that "Circles meetings are often the only time I socialize with other non-family members in a typical week."

Additionally, many participants' social networks expanded in new ways. For example, many Allies developed interpersonal relationships with people living in poverty for the first time, and, similarly, many Leaders developed interpersonal relationships with people not living in poverty. As a Leader explained:

Before I joined Circles, I did know a couple people who were middle class but we weren't close. They're always busy with vacations and going out and doing things I didn't do, or can't afford to do, and, so, it was different; it was just like "hi" and "bye," you know. Most of them, I knew that I wasn't like them, even though I knew them. Now they see me different. It's amazing.

Other participants, especially Leaders, noted expanding professional networks. As a Leader put it, "I have built business relationships, and whether I'm in Circles or not [in the future], I will know who to call, who to contact to get what I need."

**Positively affecting cross-class interpersonal relationship development.** In particular, though these practices, Longmont Circles positively affected cross-class interpersonal relationship development for many participants and fostered relationships of mutual respect between Leaders and Allies. Leaders grew in their understanding that all people have hardships, worries, and insecurities. Leaders also learned that status differences are perceived at all levels of hierarchy.

Allies described their increased respect for the hardships of people living in poverty. As explained above, because Allies learned that poverty is difficult and requires certain skills to negotiate, they gained respect for the Leaders who they see using those skills. An Ally said of her Leader:

I really respect her strength and perseverance. She's had one hurdle after another, but she's kept going through hardship and disappointment and people telling her that she was going to fail. She's a strong one.

The interactions promoted at Longmont Circles fostered a climate of acceptance and unity. As a result, the Longmont Circles program made significant progress at flattening the hierarchy between social classes, both internally within the group and, to a lesser extent, externally in the broader community. Within the group, many participants spoke about the "lack of egos," the "absences of jockeying for political power," and absence of judgment. As Ally Walter explained:

I think there's a good relationship between the Circle Leaders and the Allies, because ...Allies don't try to come across like, "Oh, I'm better than you because I've got a house to live in" and all that.

Out of this flattened class hierarchy came a sense of equality and “egalitarian spirit” between participants, which many participants—although more Allies than Leaders—described being pervasive and integral to the program. For example, Ally Phillip explained that what is most rewarding, for me, about Circles is creating relationships and hearing people’s stories and just developing this sense of equal community. That happens really just by Circle Leaders and Allies just being themselves. The Allies that I’ve met do not push themselves on others, push their good fortune on others, or hold up their own lives as examples to others. It’s just that we’re all in this together, and so I think there’s a certain sense of humility about their life and no need to build themselves up or talk about how they made it and are different from Circle Leaders. There’s that real sense of, “We’re all in this together.”

Another Ally explained that

there’s a sense of equality, you know. As Allies, we don’t pretend to have all the answers, and the way that the program is designed, it’s really designed from the idea that people are equal and from an egalitarian spirit about the whole movement and the whole group. So, I don’t think there’s this “us and them” mentality; rather, we are all together.

A Leader echoed this theme, saying, “Nobody pretends to be better than anyone else. We’re all just trying to be equals and come together as a community.”

Building this climate of equality takes effort by all participants. A participant explained that “it takes both the Circle Leaders and the Allies working together to make progress. The Circle Leaders need to learn to be vulnerable and the Allies need to learn to be friends instead of case workers.” To accomplish this goal, Allies and Leaders alike described enacting communication-based accommodations. Some Allies recounted talking differently as a means of

lessening differences. For example, an Ally mentioned her commitment to “let people choose their own path” and said:

Rather than me putting on them what I think works, I’m letting them find their own way.

That’s much more exciting and inspiring to me, than for me to just tell them, “Oh, you’ve got it wrong, listen to me, here’s what you should do.”

Ally Connie spoke about the need to “slow down” and respect the individual pace and unique experience of others:

As an Ally, I’ve learned to slow down. That feels really different from how I first started out and [what] my expectations [were] then. I think because we [Allies] get so busy, we think we know what to do and we’re going to do it our way, and we’re going to help people by knowing how to do it. And all of a sudden you have to stop [because] you can’t do that. [Instead] you can say, “Well when I went through something and this is what I did,” but every experience is unique, and so just because that’s what you did, it doesn’t mean it’s going to work for someone else.

Similarly, another Ally explained, “It is good to be reminded that everybody has their own pace, some people start right out of the shoot, others wait until the last minute.”

As another example, Ally Josephine described ensuring that she interacts with Leaders in a way that promotes encouragement:

One of the things that I think is really key, from an Ally point of view, is that every word needs to be thought about before you say it. I don’t mean walking on eggshells but I mean, if I’m going to say something to someone, I want there to be an underlying sense of encouragement behind it. I wouldn’t ever look at someone and say, “You’re a mess!” or “There’s no way that you can do that!” because that totally shuts down the exploration

process and will cause someone to shut down and not want to talk, and shut off their [sic] trust in you. People who don't know how that works or who haven't been introduced to that as a way to work with people who are trying to bring themselves up, they're like appalled at some of the Leaders' goals because they think it's just impossible or unrealistic.

But me, when someone pops up with a goal that seems crazy outrageous, I'm like, 'Great! Let's drill into it, let's explore it!' because that's how you really get to know what is driving that person. When someone says, "I want to be an astronaut in 5 years," and you know that to be an astronaut there's certain things that have to be in place, and it's just not realistic, I'm not thinking about it not being realistic; I'm thinking, "Oh, I'm really curious what is making that person want that" and then I can get to the heart of their [sic] dreams.

As yet another example, other Allies recounted making themselves vulnerable as a way to "level the playing field." As an Ally explained:

I think it's important for Allies to make themselves willing to be vulnerable, so that other people feel encouraged and less fearful. Because in my mind, I think it can be very intimidating if you're a Leader to walk into these meetings. They might be thinking, "Oh, Allies think they're up here and I'm down here." But, you know, if the Allies are willing to go, "Oh yeah, I'm a human being too, with problems and things, too," not to get into a problem-sharing fest but to allow for the fact that we're all human, we all have frailties, and strengths and weaknesses, and it's all okay, that sends off this message that we're all equal.

With the same intention of fostering a climate of equality, Leaders also made accommodations, albeit ones that were enacted differently than accommodations made by Allies. For example, Leaders took risks in sharing goals and challenges with others, and in asking for help from others. A Leader described her process of risk-taking with the intent of fostering equality:

I guess that one day, it just came down to me wanting to pull my weight [in my Circle]. I realized that my Allies had shared personal things and that it was probably hard for them [to do that], so I decided it was my turn to take this leap of faith and tell them more about me and what's going on and [including], even some of the tougher things to talk about.

Leader Glenn described the risks he took in asking for help from his Allies, and how difficult that initial asking was for him:

I would go to Circles when we first started and I remember back then, I was so depressed and I would come to Circles and pass half the time doing nothing. I wasn't taking it seriously and I wasn't getting much help and I wasn't asking for any help from [my Allies]. Then one night after a meeting, I was taking [a fellow Circle Leader] home and he said, "Glenn, you have to ask for help!" I'm originally from the middle class and I ended up in poverty because of a few things like [divorce expenses and overspending], so I wasn't really used to asking for help, but I took [the fellow Circle Leader's] advice to heart and I did finally ask for help from my Allies, and that's when things started to change. The hardest thing for any Circle Leader, and I believe this with my whole heart, is to make that first goal, to actually say, and actually believe, I'm going to do something, and to ask for help from others to take steps [toward that goal].

As a result of these accommodations from both Allies and Leaders, Longmont Circles represented the first time that many Leaders have felt equal to and accepted by middle-class or “wealthy” people. Creating this environment of acceptance was paramount, because there was a perception—fostered through the teachings of the Circles program (e.g., its reliance on Payne’s [1996] “culture of poverty” class divisions and perpetuated by Circles staff—that Allies and Leaders, as a participant explained, “come from fundamentally different worlds.”

**Creating a community.** All participants of Longmont Circles described the culmination of the relationship building at Circles as creating a community feeling within participants. In this sense, community is understood as more than just the amalgamation of the interpersonal relationships that participants developed. Rather, as Tinder (1995, p. 66) described, community represents “a kind of interpersonal unity that is somehow authentic as distinguished from various kinds of interpersonal unity that are merely apparent.”

In Chapter 2, the concept of community was explained, including two approaches to community building: the transmission model, which sees communication as a tool to improve upon an existing community or group, and the constitutive model, which views community as a phenomenon that emerges from communication. As the data reflect, community building in at Longmont Circles was approached from both transmission and constitutive perspectives.

On the one hand, from a transmission perspective, particular CCPs were employed as tools to accomplish specific purposes or goals (e.g., educating participants how to become better listeners) that built and sustained relationships and group community. For example, some Longmont Circles participants attributed the constructed sense of community to some of the CCPs that the program encouraged. For example, a Leader explained that “we learned to be a community by doing activities where we learned to listen to each other and support each other

and by working together to solve problems.” As another example, Ally Walter attributed the development of community to the CCP of regularly scheduled interactions, and asserted, “I think community comes really just from getting together every week.”

On the other hand, from a constitutive perspective, communication was as a mode through which the collective community was socially constructed and sustained. For example, some participants attributed the development of community at Longmont Circles to facets broader than CCPs, such as the group’s communication or the general group climate. For example, a Leader explained the development of community by saying, “It’s not so much the exact activities themselves as the rhythm of it all. That over time creates something in itself.” As another example, Ally Pam foregrounded the importance of open communication in the development of community,

The group climate has been casual enough that it is okay when someone else makes a comment or asks a question, and people can be honest and not have to pretend that everything is fine. I think it’s just being real in the big [full group] circle that has made our group a community, and that we continue to be real is a good sign of our strong community. I think that what is different about this whole Circles thing is that it is about getting to know people on a level that’s less superficial and more about understanding their day-to-day lives, and I think that caring evolves out of that. It didn’t happen right away. I still remember when I first went to the Circle meeting; at first, I kept thinking, “Why should I care?” and wondering whether or not I should stay involved because of the big commitment time. I’m so glad I did, because I’ve evolved to know that I really care about these people!

Regardless of their perspective, all participants who completed questionnaires (seven Allies and five Leaders) reported that the Longmont Circles group “has built a strong community.” Moreover, many participants expressed surprise that such a tight-knit community could be built between people living in poverty and those who do not. As an Ally explained, Circles “has given me a possibility that I didn’t know existed: for community to exist between really diverse people.”

Some participants described the sense of community at Longmont Circles as a feeling, including Ally Josephine:

When I walk into the room, there’s just this energy that comes from everyone, this feeling of a kind of glow or vibration, and because of that, at Circles, I’m just in this total place of happy bliss and contentment.

Others described the community built at Longmont Circles through the metaphor of a family, such as an Ally, who explained:

For better or for worse, we’re there for each other as family. We’re one big messy family. Sometimes we’re lovey-dovey, and sometimes we fight, but we’re a community either way. Sometimes I think that it’s like a soap opera with real people! But I know that no matter what, I’ve got a great group of people to help me out when I need it.

Continuing the family metaphor, a Leader said, “In our little community, I’ve got some people who are like siblings—sisters and brothers—and some who are like parents—moms and dads—and even some who are like my children.”

Other participants described the community by its actions such as Ally Josephine, who said:

Our Circles community is everybody working together and supporting each other, and the commitment of everyone to the program and especially the Leaders' willingness to work really hard, accept advice, and try some different things that do push them outside of their comfort zone. Everyone is working, everyone is trying, everyone is doing, and the result is what we are a community. It's been wonderful to watch it grow and develop.

### **Effects on Participants' Behaviors**

Sixth, Circles practices affected many participants' behaviors. Specifically, as described below, many participants reported changes in their financial and communicative behaviors, and in their enactment and receipt of social support.

**Financial behaviors.** Some participants described how participation in Longmont Circles had changed their financial behaviors, with many treating money as "a more precious commodity." For example, many Allies and Leaders alike reported being more "careful" with money, saving money more diligently, and making more careful purchases. As an Ally explained, "When I'm living on my own, I'm definitely going to be very careful with my finances." Another Ally noted, "It's taught me that I really can't take money for granted, and I'm going to save and put money away, because there are so many unknown events that you need to be prepared for."

**Communicative behaviors.** Circles also affected most participants' communicative behaviors. For example, the questionnaire data revealed that Leaders increasingly asked for help from their Allies, with all five Leaders (100%) reporting increases on that item, and all attributing the change to their participation in Circles.

Participants also asserted that Longmont Circles has changed how participants talk about poverty. Allies reported an increase in talking about issues of poverty or systemic change with

others. For example, an Ally who is a professor explained that he now makes an effort to incorporate examples “about what it means to live in poverty and their difficulties with the system, and how we have to take into account those issues as professionals” into teaching curriculum. Leaders reported being able to talk about poverty in more nuanced ways, with increased knowledge of statistics, policies, and current events, which builds credibility and, in the words of a Leader, “makes people take it more seriously.”

**Social support.** Participating in Longmont Circles increased perceptions of social support between participants (perceived available support) and increased some participants’ willingness to give social support to others (enacted support). *Social support* describes a process “inextricably woven into communication behavior” (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987, p. 14) of how individuals help others to cope with stress. Social support often is categorized with respect to five primary types: informational, emotional, esteem, and tangible, and network support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990).

*Informational support* involves “providing the individual with advice or guidance concerning possible solutions to a problem” (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322). Longmont Circles participants, on many occasions, provided informational support by sharing advice, recommendations, or counsel in particular areas that Leaders ask for help in, or by offering suggestions for tackling a problem in a particular way. Additionally, informational support was given through the CCPs of announcements and problem solving of obstacles to moving out of poverty.

*Emotional support* is “the ability to turn to others for comfort and security during times of stress, leading the person to feel that he or she is cared for by others” (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322). For example, the questionnaire data showed that Allies, in particular, improved

their ability to give emotional support to others, with five of seven (57%) Allies reporting improvements on that item.

Additionally, I often observed the expression of emotion and subsequent comforting behaviors (e.g., hugging, friendly hand holding during stressful moments, and comforting touch) at Longmont Circles meetings, and participants talk frequently about how Circles has helped them to express emotions more freely and without fear of judgment, and how they “feel really cared about by this group.” For example, during the focus group interview, a Leader said, “It’s so great that we can all get together and we can laugh, because I never did laugh before I joined Circles.” An Ally chimed in with “or cry—sometimes we cry,” and another Leader followed with, “Yes, now we all have someone we can laugh with, or cry with, and there’s no judging.”

Many participants spoke about how “important” and “grounding” this emotional support was in their lives, and that it represented a “different level” of interaction and a “stronger feeling of being supported” than many other friends or acquaintances. As an Ally claimed:

I’ve never really felt, or even witnessed, this type of, um, caring and support coming from a group to people of all different types and backgrounds. I call it a family a lot, because it has that sense of unconditional caring, but, to be honest, my own family isn’t this caring or supportive. My family doesn’t cry together or laugh together this much; we don’t share our successes this much, we don’t cheer each other on this much. So, it is very unique and very wonderful, very special to me.

Leader Delores explained the value of this support in her life:

Now I know that there’s always someone out there that I can call that understands what my position is, that knows that I’m feeling and thinking. I know I can call them and talk, whether it’s another Circle Leader or an Ally. I think it’s fantastic to have those numbers

to call, where you can say, “Have you got a minute to talk?” to share something exciting or ask for help or even cry, if I need to. It’s really truly great to have that support in my life.

Participating in Longmont Circles practices also affected some participants’ willingness to give emotional support to others. For example, an Ally described a transition in her willingness to give support to the sick and elderly:

I have always shied away from anything to do with older people and especially hospice-type care. Now, the Circle Leader to whom I was initially assigned, is fighting leukemia again. She had gone into remission and was waiting for a bone marrow transplant, but the cancer returned full force recently. The prognosis is not good because the cancer is so aggressive. She just underwent her fourth course of chemotherapy and is still recovering in the hospital. I am going to visit her at the hospital this week and as often as I have time, even though I need to drive into Denver. Her daughter left for home today and she just needs support.

This increased willingness to give support represents a drastic change for this Ally, who explained, “A year ago, I would never have dreamed that I would willingly go visit someone in the cancer ward unless they were a very close relative. Now it seems like the good, right, and only thing to do.”

*Esteem support* is “the bolstering of a person’s sense of competence or self-esteem by other people” (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322). The questionnaire data demonstrated that some participants improved their “ability to help others build their self-esteem,” with two of seven Allies (29%) and four of five Leaders (80%) reporting improvements on that item.

Additionally, many Leaders described, as explained above, how participating in Circles and interacting with Longmont Circles' participants has increased their self-esteem, confidence, and, as a result, that they feel more empowered to achieve their goals. A particular CCP that encourages esteem support is New and Good, where participants offer verbal (e.g., praise and encouragement) and nonverbal (e.g., clapping, smiling, and high-fiving) displays of their excitement over the success of others. An Ally explained that "encouragement is a really powerful substance and you don't need a lot, a little really goes a long way," but later suggested, "even so, we really do give a lot of encouragement to each other anyway!" A Leader suggested that "giving encouragement and shows of support" to others is one of the "best things we do at meetings."

Participants also asserted that the type of encouragement and esteem-building that people give at Longmont Circles is "genuine" and "real," and that it is communicated "sincerely" rather than out of a sense of obligation or "just to fake praise." Another Ally extended this idea, explaining that "I feel like there is authentic encouragement here, where it's not just puffery, you feel that it's the real deal, it's genuine."

*Tangible aid* involves "concrete instrumental assistance, in which a person in a stressful situation is given the necessary resources," such as financial assistance or "physical help with tasks . . . to cope with the stressful event" (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322). Leaders, and, to a larger extent, Allies, increasingly shared their personal resources with others through the sharing table, bringing in gently used clothing, kitchen goods, bedding, electronics, and even coupons and gift certificates to pass on to others. Longmont Circles community dinner meetings also frequently included requests for services (e.g., installing a computer program, hooking up a new television, or filing taxes) that are filled by other Circles participants or outside organizations.

For example, Ally Carla described that when her car broke down, her Allies “got a mechanic to fix my car who didn’t charge me anything.”

Finally, *network support* describes “a person’s feeling part of a group whose members have common interests and concerns” (Cutrona & Russell, 1990, p. 322). Many participants expressed surprise that they perceived more available network support than they had expected. For example, a Leader explained, “I didn’t think I’d find a group like this, with, you know, people that share a goal [of ending poverty] and really are willing to work together to make it happen.” Similarly, Ally Josephine said:

I feel like I’m having a really positive experience just in working together with other people who care about some of the same sort of things that I do. I haven’t really had that at this level before, so it’s a rarefied atmosphere.

Leaders, in particular, found comfort by interacting with other people living in poverty and through opportunities to share common problems and coping strategies. Leader Mary explained that her “confidence” and “success” is coming from, in part, “interacting with [others] in the discussions that we have, and knowing that other people are dealing with some of the same problems and Allies actually care about your problems even when they’re not dealing with them personally.” She further noted that

I think the group discussions have been like, really huge in a lot of areas, because there’s time when you find that you’re not the only one who is going through something, and that we all have these frustrations and that’s been a really big change in what I thought. I don’t feel like I’m the only one who is dealing with problems.”

The story of a Leader’s struggle to keep her Habitat for Humanity home is a good illustration of the many types of social support offered by Longmont Circles participants. This

Leader has been working for over 2 years to get a Habitat for Humanity home. In that time, she fulfilled all the necessary obligations to get a home, including 500 hours of volunteer work, classes, and many meetings, but she met many bureaucratic obstacles along the way that made it seem to her that she “would never get the house, that it was impossible.” As she explained:

It’s been a long haul. We all built 500 hours and we took a ton of classes. We did all this stuff, and then in the end, they were like, “You know what, you can’t have this house unless you switch jobs.” So I did switch jobs. Then there was an issue with my payroll, so I worked that out. Then they said, “Since you switched jobs, your original application has been changed, so you’re disqualified,” so they were going to boot me! And I was like, “But you told me to switch jobs!” So I was a mess. Then they were like, “Well, okay, we will still take your application if you clear every single debt on your credit report.” And we’re talking over \$20,000 worth of debt! Old debt! And I said, “That’s crazy, it’s old debt, it’s no longer being collected, because it’s over 10 years old.” And they said, “Well, we think it would prove what a neat person you are if you clear out all of your debt.” And I thought, “Oh man, well that wasn’t really part of the original bargain but okay.” So I faced that challenge.

Along the way, there were many times where this Leader felt that the process had become “too difficult” and, on a number of occasions, said to her Allies, “Well, I think I should just step away from this house, because I just can’t do this. It’s too much,” but each time, they encouraged her to persevere, using emotional and esteem support. The Leader noted that an Ally often said, “You can do this, and you better! You have worked too damn hard for this house!” which encouraged her to believe in herself and to remain diligent about meeting difficult

challenges. The Leader also felt network support from the large Circles group and frequently shared updates about her Habitat progress during New and Good.

There were other occasions when this Leader's Allies or other Longmont Circles members provided her with informational support or tangible aid, such as when they helped her to access resources about her debt, gave advice on how she might approach Habitat staff about her problem, and physically accompanied her to Habitat meetings. The Leader stressed the importance of this tangible aid and the significant difference she felt that it made on her ability to keep her home:

I've found that bringing a . . . person in of more power or dominance really helped me, because before I was by myself, and it was one way. Then, I had all this help, and they [staff members of the Habitat for Humanity organization] changed their tune. Then the next time, I brought [Allies], and [Habitat staff] were like, "Oh crap, she's not going to back off!" and I made sure to bring people with me every time, so [Habitat staff] couldn't say, "Oh well, we didn't say that," because there was a lot of that going on.

This Leader later shared her eventual success at receiving a house with the group one Monday evening during New and Good. As she proudly recounted:

And so, um, Friday night I got an e-mail saying, "We reviewed all of the stuff we made you bring in"—all these letters, it was just a kind of stuff—"and we decided you did everything we said, so, you got the house!"

She went on to explain her happiness:

I haven't owned a home in, like, 20 years. And my kids and I have moved so many times and we haven't ever stayed in one place for more than 2 years. We had to move every time I lost a job. . . . So this is massive, this is huge. To have my own place, that no one

can say, “You're not allowed to have a kitty!” “Your grass is too long!” “You can't paint the house!” “Turn that music down!” Except for Marco, I guess, since we will be neighbors!

The other group members responded with an enthusiastic round of applause and cheering: (“Wow!” “Awesome!” “Way to stick with it!” and “Way to go!”), and they all celebrated with the homemade “Brownies for Humanity” that an Ally brought as a token of support.

### **Effects on Participants' Goals and Motivations**

Seventh, Circles practices affected many participants' goals and motivations. Circles practices improved some Leaders' ability to set goals, as well as some Allies' ability to help others attain their goals. In general, Leaders became increasingly adept at setting goals, as reflected in the questionnaire data. Specifically, four of the five Leaders (80%) reported increased ability to set and work toward goals.

Moreover, as explained earlier, participants received training to understand and set “SMART goals,” and engaged in a variety of activities that were designed to help them brainstorm, define, set, and progress toward their goals. Leaders acknowledged the importance of these practices in helping them to understand and set goals. For example, Leader Mary was particularly fond of the collage activity, saying, “It's been hard for me to decide exactly what I want, and making a collage made me stop and think and almost do some soul searching about what my goals are.” Furthermore, Mary felt that the creative process of selecting pictures to represent goals and gluing those to a poster helped her to “take a step towards making [goals] come true” because “getting them out of [her] head and onto paper made them more real.” Additionally, working on this project with her Allies, “who didn't judge [her goals] or laugh at

them or tell [her] they were impossible [to achieve],” increased her feelings of social support and made her feel that she “really could accomplish these things.”

Setting and achieving goals undoubtedly is an important part of the process of moving out of poverty. As such, most Allies framed Leaders’ progress as linked directly to their ability to progress toward and achieve their goals. Describing a Leader’s success, an Ally remarked:

I know she will be successful, because she has shown how successful she is in Circles already by accomplishing so many of her goals. When she meets a goal, she’s like, “Okay, let’s move on to the next one!” She is always motivated to keep going, and I think that, more than anything else, that is the key to getting out of poverty.

Allies also recognized that maintaining a positive atmosphere of support and acceptance is crucial to Leaders’ willingness to share their goals and their progress on those goals with other group members. As an Ally explained:

Because Circles creates this really positive atmosphere, my Circle Leader is always just full of accomplishments. She always starts out [during meetings] with [talking about] good things and she is very focused on her goals, and the goals that she is working on next and the goals that she has already accomplished. Being so positive helps her keep talking and sharing and moving on those goals.

In addition to Leaders’ improved goal setting, many Allies showed improvement in their ability to help others define and plan steps to achieve their goals and plan steps. This ability involves listening to others’ goals, being supportive and motivating, sharing resources or directing Leaders to helpful resources, and providing critique or helping Leaders to redirect when necessary. The questionnaire data reflected these improvements for Allies, as five of the seven (71%) reported increased ability to help others set and work toward their goals.

In many cases, Leaders asked for help planning and articulating goals they needed to accomplish to move out of poverty, and, as a result, much meeting discussion—in particular, during monthly inner-circle meetings—focuses on that type of discourse. Leader Thomas explained that during these meetings, Allies “bring perspective to a conversation and help us [Leaders] define points of our life goals.” In fact, many Leaders viewed Allies as their primary source of help on goals and motivation. As a Leader remarked:

My Allies are really the only people I ever talk to about my goals, and they’re always supportive. So they keep supporting me, and I keep talking to them about where I want to go, and they help me make it happen.

Motivation is a key part of pursuing goals, and Leaders often described Allies as important motivators. As Leader Thomas explained:

Allies are motivators. If you don’t understand what your motivation is in life, and you don’t really know what is going to push you forward in your journey out of poverty, [Allies will] help you figure out those things. Everybody does it differently. Rob’s way is by helping you motivate yourself, and Josephine’s way is by creatively inspiring you, but either way, the underlying thing is that they are all motivators, helping you get moving and get over your fears.

### **Effects on Participants’ Ability to Move Out of Poverty**

Finally, Circles practices affected some participants’ ability to move out of poverty. This progress will be described both in terms of the results sought by the national Circles program and also through the stagnancy and success stories of some Leaders.

**Progress toward results sought by the national Circles program.** As explained in Chapter 2, the Circles manual outlined six “primary results sought by Circles” (S. C. Miller et al.,

2010, p. 133): household income, assets (particularly savings), debt, credit, health insurance for everyone in the home, and enough food and affordable housing. Leaders' progress toward each of these goals is explained below. In general, the data regarding economic effects of the Longmont Circles program on participants are consistent with the data collected in national Circles studies (see the detailed report from Move the Mountain Leadership Center, 2010); however, longitudinal studies need to be conducted to determine exactly how Longmont Circles participants make progress toward the results sought by the national Circles program.

First, three of the six Leaders increased either their household income, their assets, or both. One of those Leaders increased his annual income from \$34,000 to \$40,000 (a 17.6% increase), and now donates \$500 to charity each month "to give back to others." A second Leader increased her monthly income from \$1,200 each month to, in some months (particularly in the summer), over \$5000. Lastly, because she has successfully started a small business, Leader Mary has substantially increased her assets, although she has not yet increased her income.

Second, three of the six Leaders decreased their debt and increased their credit. One of those Leaders decreased his debt by 90% in 10 months, reducing his total debt from over \$20,000 to under \$2,000, and he expects to pay off the remainder (which includes a car loan and back taxes) in 8 months. A second Leader also started the Circles program with close to \$20,000 of debt; at present, she has paid off the majority of her debt and expects to be completely debt-free by July 2012. She also reported that she has "learned to budget" and has improved her credit and started a savings account. The third Leader successfully paid off close to \$25,000 worth of debt, increased her credit, and increased the amount of money she keeps in her savings account (before Circles, she only kept \$5 in savings).

Two Leaders reported no changes in their total debt, and a third Leader—Mary—reported that her debt increased since she began Circles, although that debt primarily was related to expenses associated with starting her small business. Although Mary was “frustrated” by accumulating more debt, she believed that it is a “normal part of starting a business,” and she remains “confident” that she will soon pay it off.

Third, only one Leader secured health insurance. Before starting Circles, this Leader had no insurance but now has full coverage through her jobs. Additionally, although another Leader did not have health insurance, he reported improving his physical and mental health in general, explaining:

A year ago, I was so sad and depressed, but not anymore. My Allies made me commit to doing an exercise program and, at first, I was resistant, but I set that goal and stuck with it. I’m a Zumba guru now. I go three times a week! And I’m healthy now! I lost 28 pounds, and I’ve got 30 friends that are women, and I’m having a ball! I have really improved my health, both from doing Zumba and from getting mentally right. Before, I was paying \$600 on medication, and now I only pay for supplements. I’m doing amazing now.

Fourth, all Circle Leaders reported having enough food, though some explained that it is difficult to purchase healthy food choices, which tend to be more expensive. As a Leader reported:

I feel bad sometimes for [my son] because I can’t always afford to buy him what’s healthy. He needs to eat healthy, and sometimes I buy him Fiber One, but it’s freaking \$3.67 a box. So guess what, he’s going to be eating more Captain Crunch because I can get twice as much in a box of Captain Crunch than I can in something healthier for him. I feel bad, but I do what I have to do to make ends meet.

Mary also explained that the free meal provided during weekly Circles community dinners “helps, because I don't have to worry about dinner that night.”

Lastly, three Leaders reported securing better or more affordable housing. One of those Leaders moved out of his mother's house and into his own apartment. The second Leader successfully completed the many requirements to getting a Habitat for Humanity house, which she recently moved into. The third Leader paid off the mortgage of the doublewide trailer she currently lives in, and plans to put a down payment on a house in June of 2012, when she finishes paying off all her debt.

**Leader stagnancy.** As some of these results indicate, there has been prolonged stagnancy in two of the Leaders. The first stagnant Leader is a notoriously outspoken and negative man, described by other participants as being “constantly ornery,” “never satisfied,” and as “forever seeing the glass half empty.” One of this Leader's Allies described the slow-moving relationship:

Well, there is this issue with my Circle Leader because it seems that he has difficulty taking advi- (pauses), or, rather, has difficulty setting personal goals to move on. I'm willing to have a relationship with this individual, but I'm not sure if this person is willing yet to have a relationship with me.

This Leader has made little progress toward the results sought by the national Circles program (e.g., no increases in income, assets, or credit, decreases in debt, or positive changes in housing) toward his personal goals since beginning Longmont Circles.

A second Leader also has made very little progress toward the results sought by the national Circles program. She has not set or completed many goals, and seems to be generally disinterested in the program.

In relation to these two instances of stagnancy, participants described two commonalities that prevented these Leaders' success. First, participants explained that these Leaders are, as an Ally explained, "waiting for something to happen to change their lives" instead of working to change their circumstances. For example, the first stagnant Leader profiled above described wanting a job, but instead of actively pursuing employment, he announced on a number of occasions that he was "waiting for the economy to improve [because] it's not really worth it to try right now." He further explained, "In my particular circumstances, my ability to get out of poverty is stuck to the economy. When the general economy improves, I'll be able to get a job."

Another Ally explained that as a result of these Leaders' beliefs that external change (e.g., the economy) was necessary for their future success, they often worked less hard to achieve that success on their own. An Ally asserted that "what the Circle Leaders who are not as successful fail to realize is how hard the [successful] Leaders have worked in and of themselves." Similarly, with regard to the second stagnant Leader profiled above, as an Ally explained:

Well, she's had a lot of bad luck, but mostly it's because she hasn't put in quite the amount of effort. She's trying to attain her goals, but it almost seems like her Ally is working harder than she is. It seems like she has almost given up because one thing after another is bringing her down.

A second commonality between these two stagnant Leaders that participants believed led to their stagnancy was a reluctance to ask for help. The first profiled Leader, in particular, has remained, as an Ally described, "fiercely independent" and has not asked for help from his Allies. One of his Allies explained:

I expected [the Leader] to be a little more open about asking for help and advice and [he] simply [has] not, and so in my role I don't want to push any of that. I don't have an

agenda, so I've come to understand my role at this point to simply be present. I don't see it as my role to push him . . . So, at the moment, I go to meetings and generally, we [the other Allies] just go to listen, we prod a little bit, but we don't get very far. So, are we building a relationship? Maybe, and maybe that's what it's about. And for the moment, that's okay, but it's not leading to much progress for [this Leader].

Another Ally described said that this same Leader "is pretty standoffish about seeking help or advice in any shape or form, and so the relationship feels—well, I wouldn't say strained—but, it's certainly not close."

The second stagnant Leader also has not asked for much help from her Allies. A fellow Leader described that the stagnant leader "hasn't set any goals, hasn't identified really any problems, and certainly hasn't asked anyone for help. She sometimes helps other people, but she seems less interested in getting help herself, and she needs it." Because of these stagnant Leaders' general lack of effort and unwillingness to ask for help, other Longmont Circles participants were not optimistic about their potential for success.

**Leader success stories.** Fortunately, although Leaders' collective progress towards the specific outcomes sought by the Circles campaign demonstrates mixed results, there have been many significant success stories from Leaders enrolled in the Longmont Circles program. Three Leaders' stories are described below.

First, through her perseverance and with the help of support, guidance, and networking connections from her Allies, Leader Mary started a small online business selling outdoor equipment. As previously mentioned, Mary got her start as a businesswoman by organizing the decorating for the Circles Christmas party, which sparked her interests in decorating as a potential career opportunity. Mary mustered her confidence and expressed her interest in

decorating to the Longmont Circles group, with members responding enthusiastically to her ideas. As she described, the group “said, ‘Hey, if that’s what you want to do, you need to go for it!’ and that gave me more confidence.” Soon after, the group encouraged her to go into business for herself and she started a small holiday-oriented decorating, wreath-making, and baking company that did well.

From her success in that venture, and continued encouragement from her Allies and other Longmont Circles participants, Mary soon expanded her business and began selling outdoor equipment, such as hydration supplies, camping supplies, and backpacks. She met with potential investors through social networks that she was introduced to by her Allies, and she secured financial support from those connections.

Today’s Mary’s business is doing very well. She has attended a few conventions and trade shows, where her expenses have been paid for by her investors, and she even had one of her products and online store promoted by a well-known athlete in the industry. I was at Mary’s house one afternoon when she got a phone call from a potential customer who had a few questions about an order that he wanted to place. I was impressed by Mary’s professional persona on the phone, and listened as she expertly answered the customer’s questions about the product. After about 20 minutes of asking questions, the man ended up buying three large items, along with a few other things. I watched as Mary worked hard to contain her excitement as she took down the customer’s information. As soon as she ended the call, she clapped her hands to her face, jumped up and down like a little girl, and then grabbed my hands and pulled me into a big hug. “Oh my gosh, it’s such a big order!” Mary excitedly announced, her eyes shining and face pulled into a giant smile. “Ahhhh, I can’t believe it! I can’t believe it!”

Other participants have recognized Mary’s success. For example, Ally Betsy described,

Week after week [Mary comes] to our [community dinner] meetings with a smile that couldn't possibly get any wider. She would just be beaming. During New and Good, it would just spill out of her, all these things that she wouldn't have dreamed were possible but that were now happening. It [is] so uplifting to see her take advantage of the help that she was given, and that, combined with her own hard work and determination, well, she's just been soaring.

Mary continues to set and complete goals through Circles, and sees herself as on a steady path out of poverty. As Mary explained:

I'm on the verge of some really big stuff. I continue to grow every day. [For example,] yesterday I talked to someone who rattled me big time [in regards to my business], but I didn't let it bother me like I would have [before Circles]. Before Circles, I would have just thrown in the towel, but now, every time I come up against something tough, I just think about what my goals are, and the kind of person that I want to be. Now, I'm a much better person, I'm much stronger than what I used to be. And I'm getting better and stronger every day. [Those things] are because of Circles, and because [my Allies] believed in me and believed I could be the person I wanted to be. And now I am that person.

Second, another Leader is making significant progress in her life, recently fulfilling her longtime goal of graduating college. She described the difficulty of this task for her and the congratulations she received from her Allies upon graduating:

When I started in Getting Ahead, I was going to college. It was very hard, because the gas was going up, and it was all the way in Aurora, and besides just being expensive, I didn't have much support. In my last semester, [a few months] into Circles, I didn't

know if I could make it but I did! I graduated in May! I was so excited about that. My Allies were totally excited too, especially because I was telling them I don't think I can do the last semester because it's too hard, you know, with the gas and everything driving out there, and so everybody was really excited about it and really happy that I made it.

This Leader attributed some of her success to support she gained from participating in Longmont Circles:

If it wasn't for Circles, I probably wouldn't have stuck in school. It wasn't because [my Allies] gave me any type of financial support but they just gave me other kinds of support—emotional support. They taught me how to get through these things, times of struggle. That's important, because they're not going to be there later. But I know now how to do some of these things on my own.

This Leader also secured a better job through a contact she met that was a friend of one of her Allies. As she explained:

One of my Allies took my resume to the director of HR to look it over, and because he works in the same place, it really helps move things. And I got the job! I probably wouldn't have otherwise, because like 100 people applied for that job, and I was just one of them—nobody special.

A few months later, this Leader described her progress in being able to maintain this job where she feels respected and important, and saw herself as being “on a path out of my struggling.” Prior to starting Circles, this Leader had a habit of taking, and then quitting, jobs because, as she said, “I felt like people didn't respect me, or looked down on me, and I felt ashamed, so I figured I'd just better quit before they fired me.” She has maintained her job and

is able to better see “that people do respect” her, “which [she] didn’t really see before.” As she said:

Now, because of my faith, and because I put my trust in God, and because of Circles, I got this job . . . that I absolutely love going to everyday. I absolutely love it. I don’t mind working the long hours. And I even have the keys to the office! You know, it feels like I’ve really, really started making a difference in my life. I’m finally really moving ahead. I didn’t see myself where I’m at today before I started Circles, because before it was impossible, but it’s not now.

Through this job, this Leader has made steady progress at paying off her debt, and, as explained above, plans to make a down payment on a house in June of this year. This Leader was exuberant over her continued progress upward and out of poverty. In an interview conducted with her, she gushed about her new positive outlook on life and her plans for the future:

Things are finally working out for me. This is the first time in my life where I feel like I’m heading in the right direction. Maybe the first time, well, since my 20s I guess, where I really feel like my life is going to change for the better. Now, I’m on a path, and I’m going to be able to provide for my grandchildren in a way that I didn’t provide for my kids. I’m going to give my grandkids the opportunities to play instruments, take self-defense [classes], go to art school, and do things that I didn’t do and that my kids didn’t do. Just having this in my mind keeps me going.

She then hedged a bit, explaining that her life “isn’t perfect or anything,” but she insisted that she is on an “upward path, moving forward.” As she explained:

I'm not falling for the cracks anymore but I'm barely getting out. I am getting out slowly, you know, slowly, slowly I'm moving upward. So, you know, it's just like, I'm making it. And you know, I'm working harder with this job now, and I'm feeling really blessed to be able to do that.

Other Leaders have noted this particular Leader's success; for example, Leader Glenn explained, She's now a lady who knows where she's going. If you saw her walking down the street, you'd say "Look at that successful woman walk! She's somebody!" And that's a big change for [this particular Leader], I saw her 16 months ago, and that wasn't the case, but [since then], she's made amazing progress!

Lastly, a third Leader has a remarkable success story. Prior to starting Circles, third Leader was, in his words, "in financial, emotional, and physical ruin." As he explained:

When I started Circles, I was a mess. [My wife and I] were overspenders, and so we were in financial ruin: we had lost our home, we had lost our cars, and then she left me. Because of what was happening with her, I was in such a bad emotional state and on such a ton of medication that I ended up in the hospital. Because of that, I lost my job. So that was the ultimate low for me.

Soon after this Leader's "ultimate low," he was paired as a circle with his Allies. He said, "We started off slow. We met all summer of 2011: we got together, we talked about stuff, and got together more, and talked more about stuff, but nothing really came of it." At that point, this Leader was overwhelmed by over \$20,000 of back taxes and debt, which was steadily increasing due to substantial legal fees and medical expenses. He had successfully negotiated his job back, but had not made much other progress, and had not built strong relationships with his Allies.

In the fall of 2011, this Leader's Allies were not optimistic about his potential for success, characterizing the Leader's problems primarily as his lack of confidence in himself and his lack of initiative to make progress towards solving his problems. For example, one of this Leader's Allies explained that he

has a reasonable paying job. It's not that he doesn't have work. He's doing okay, but not really making any progress, he's just holding on. He's been stuck for a while now . . . but he needs to take more initiative to be his own person.

Another of this Leader's Allies complained that

I think some Circle Leaders aren't really trying to get out. Unfortunately, that's how I feel about [this particular Leader] most days. Even though he's done all the requirements to get in the program, I don't think he's really interested in getting off of welfare payments. I understand why he would be that way, because he'd have to get a significantly better job to make up the difference that he currently gets [with his added governmental support income]. But that's a form of laziness, and, well, really, he's just not trying. I think it's a waste of people's efforts to help him try to get out when he's not making much effort himself.

An Ally even said that this Leader tends to avoid the community dinner meetings and "probably will continue to do so" until he either "shows more initiative" or until his relationship with this Leader grows stronger, asserting, "This is on [him], there's only so much I can do."

A drastic shift then occurred in the interactions between this third Leader and his Allies. This Leader was encouraged by another Leader to ask for help from his Allies, and as he explained:

I took his advice to heart, and I did finally ask for help from my Allies, and that's when things started to change. . . . I started to learn how to ask for help, and my Allies began to learn how to connect with me. We started working together, really listening to each other and helping each other.

With the help of his Allies, this Leader set three goals. As he explained:

I said that the first thing I need to do is get a divorce, and so we [my Circle and I] made our first goal that I was going to get divorced by the end of the year...and from that first goal, everything started to move. With the help of [an Ally], who had recently been through a divorce, I took the steps to getting my divorce finalized. Just finishing that goal was a huge deal! And with that first goal completed, I moved on to the next one, which was that I was three years behind on taxes and needed to pay all that off. And now I'm on my last goal! Can you believe it! I am on my last goal!

Then he began to cry quietly, and said,

I am just so happy. . . . I am just so proud of myself, and [without Circles] I never would have thought that any of this was possible. What Circles did for me, well, I was the catalyst, no one did these things for me, but I couldn't have done them without Circles. We did it together. [A fellow Leader] got me started, [Circles Coach] Liza kept me going, and my Allies buttoned it all up. I came to Circles a sad, broken, sick man. And now, healthy, 28 pounds lighter and entirely off my medication, and happy, and I'm working on my very last goal, which is organization. Between now and June I'm going to be moving out of my mom's place, with my taxes paid, with 90% of my debt paid off, with everything organized to where I know where everything is, and I'll be independent. This program has changed my life. And now I can be a productive member of society! I did

all that! When we walk through the steps with our Allies, when we get rid of the bad thinking, look what we can do!

As these examples illustrate, in many ways, the Longmont Circles program had real, concrete, and important impacts on both Leaders and Allies, including in relation to aiding Leaders in their efforts to become self-sufficient and move out of poverty.

### **Revisiting Circles' Model Through CCPs and Their Effects on Participants**

As the data presented in this chapter suggest, Circles represents a unique, communication-oriented, and relationship-based program. The findings from this chapter help to explain many of the CCPs engaged in by Circles' participants and their effects on participants, which provide a more complete picture of the Circles program than the five broad strategies that are collectively framed by the national Circles organization as the generative mechanism of the program:

defining a common vision of ending poverty for everyone to work toward, . . . defining a common language to discuss similarities and differences, . . . defining a shared set of values and principles to guide the healthy development of the community, . . . establishing an atmosphere of permission to use common sense, . . . [and] holding regularly scheduled meetings to share and learn together. (S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 13)

More specifically, although these five strategies are used by Longmont Circles, and although, more or less, they are enacted by participants, they do not fully capture the process that Circles uses to build cross-class interpersonal relationships and to aid people in their efforts to move out of poverty.

Furthermore, the CCPs engaged in by Longmont Circles' participants are broader than the five communicative strategies outlined by the Circles organization, and many of the effects

of the Circles program documented in this chapter can be attributed to a diverse spectrum of CCPs that is much broader than the five practices outlined by Circles. As such, I offer a revised framework for Circles approach to building cross-class community and ending poverty.

As an example of the need for an adaptation of Circles' existing model, during interviews, I asked participants about their impressions of these strategies, including both the extent to which they thought that Longmont Circles was doing these things and their perceptions of the effects of these strategies. Those interviews showed that participants had mixed feelings about the occurrence and utility of these strategies. For example, although regularly scheduled meetings were an important facet of the Circles program for participants, most interviewees said that they did not attend as regularly as they should, and some questioned whether the community dinner meetings were integral to the Circles process. The revised framework foregrounds other facets of Circles that meeting together regularly as a group may accomplish (e.g., creating opportunities for participants to coconstruct understandings of the other for people to work together to solve problems) rather than focusing on the act of meeting, as Circles does.

As such, it is more accurate to explain the Circles program through a three-step process that foregrounds communication, CCPs, and the various types of opportunities that Circles creates for participants. This revised framework is as follows: Circles employs multiple types of communication (e.g., both formal and informal types of communication), creates and engages participants in CCPs aimed at flattening the social class hierarchy and building cross-class community, and offers opportunities for participants to: (a) portray poverty as a collective (rather than individual) problem; (b) coconstruct understandings of others; (c) affirm commitment to others, the program, and to ending poverty; (d) provide social support to one another; (e) empower themselves; and (f) work together across social classes to confront individual and

structural challenges to getting out of poverty and to aiding people in their efforts to do so. The next, and final, chapter builds on this revised framework to position Longmont Circles as a communicative approach with aspirations of a second-order model of change, and the chapter introduces and discusses a new conception of the communication being promoted through Circles.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although these two categories are broad and encompass a diverse variety of CCPs, they reflect the most useful categorization of CCPs that, typically, were enacted by Longmont Circles participants. Additionally, as explained in Chapter 3, these practices could have been examined and deconstructed at a more microlevel unit of analysis, which might have revealed different CCPs or different forms of categorizing those CCPs.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This research study was designed to document and understand the collective communicative practices (CCPs) employed by Longmont Circles and the effects of those practices on participants. This chapter discusses how this research study addressed those foci and the implications of the findings, both theoretically—with respect to relationships among poverty, communication, and community—and practically—with regard to what lessons learned from this analysis suggest might be best practices for antipoverty programs, including Longmont Circles, in particular.

This chapter first discusses the conceptual contributions of the study; specifically, how the research findings suggest a new conception of the communication being promoted (albeit unconsciously or not explicitly) through Circles, called *interactional capital*, which describes the types of communication and other communicative resources that facilitate the creation and maintenance of social capital through interactions with others. The chapter then discusses the impact of an interactional capital approach on participants at the individual, collective, and societal levels. Contributions of the study for the academic exploration of poverty as a communication problem subsequently are discussed, including the importance of foregrounding a social justice perspective in relation to communication and the practice of aiding people in their efforts to move out of poverty. The discussion then considers the practical implications of the study; best practices for antipoverty programs, in general; and suggestions for the Circles program, in particular. Limitations of the study then are identified and directions for future

research are suggested. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how this research contributes to understanding the intersections of poverty, community building, and communication processes, and how the ongoing practice of social justice research benefits individuals and communities.

### **Conceptual Implications of the Study**

This study documented the collective communicative practices (CCPs) involved in the implementation of the Longmont Circles program and the effects of engaging in those practices on the participants involved. In documenting those practices and effects, what emerged was a framework that is more relevant and meaningful to what people living in poverty and their supporting volunteers actually engage in at Longmont Circles than the five strategies that, taken together, Circles identifies as its generative mechanism (i.e., “defining a common vision of ending poverty for everyone to work toward, . . . defining a common language to discuss similarities and differences, . . . defining a shared set of values and principles to guide the healthy development of the community, . . . establishing an atmosphere of permission to use common sense, . . . [and] holding regularly scheduled meetings to share and learn together; S. C. Miller, 2008, p. 13). This section documents important conceptual implications of this study, including framing Longmont Circles as both a communicative approach that aspires to be a second-order model of change, followed by the introduction of the interactional capital concept and its application to the type of change being promoted at Longmont Circles. The section concludes with an examination of the impact of interactional capital at individual, collective, and systemic levels.

### **Longmont Circles' Unique Communicative Approach to Aiding People in Their Efforts to Move Out of Poverty**

The findings from this study support the notion that the Circles program represents a decidedly communicative approach to ending poverty, which appears to stand in contrast to other programs that do not focus on communication (although this research did not study any other programs). Chapter 2 documented various approaches to confronting poverty, and explained that most antipoverty programs do not employ a communication approach (although there are a few notable exceptions, including the case studies described in that chapter). Moreover, it was pointed out in Chapter 2 that the few programs that do employ a communication approach do not foreground community as the primary means (e.g., the generative mechanism) for aiding people in their efforts to move out of poverty.

As the data presented in Chapter 4 demonstrated, the Circles program represents an approach to ending poverty that employs specific communicative practices to encourage participants to build interpersonal relationships and social capital for the purpose of, eventually, moving out of poverty. I also offered a revised framework (from the five strategies identified by Circles) detailing the communicative processes of Circles that showed that Circles: employs multiple types of communication (e.g., both formal and informal types of communication), creates and engages participants in CCPs aimed at flattening the social class hierarchy and building cross-class community, and offers opportunities for participants to (a) portray poverty as a collective (rather than individual) problem; (b) coconstruct understandings of others; (c) affirm commitment to others, the program, and to ending poverty; (d) demonstrate social support to each other; (e) empower themselves; and (f) work together across social classes to confront

individual and structural challenges to getting out of poverty and to aiding people in their efforts to do so.

Participants recognize how different the types of interactions promoted by Circles are, as compared to other organizational programs in which they have participated that aid people living in poverty. For example, in contrast to the egalitarian interpersonal relationships promoted in Circles (i.e., between Circle Leaders and Allies, and between Leaders and Circles staff members), research supports the idea that people who live in poverty often interact with others who aim to help them move out of poverty (e.g., human services providers, and caseworkers) in relatively authoritarian interpersonal relationships, which promotes interaction that is “more self-interested, less affiliative, often highly antisocial, [and] more stressful” (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 23) than the interactions typically engaged in by people who do not live in poverty. Those interpersonal relationships stand in sharp contrast to the high-quality interpersonal relationships being promoted at Circles. As a Leader explained:

At social services agencies, the people who work there are just absolutely dehumanizing. You can tell in the way they treat you, ignore you, minimize you; it’s all in the hopes that you’ll just go away, and lots of people do.

Other participants in Circles pointed to important distinctions between the interactions they experienced at Circles and the interactions they experienced at human services agencies. For example, as another Leader described:

The people in these positions where you go for services, well, they look down on you. They act like, you know, what’s the point, or they act like my ambitions aren’t enough for it to be worth their time. My take from them was that they felt that I was satisfied with where I was at already, or otherwise I could get out [of poverty]. But it’s not that

easy; you just can't get out [of poverty]. You know, there's a lot going on; you can't just quit your job and go looking for another one, a better job, because when you have bills to pay, and you don't have anybody to help you, you have to stay there and hope for the better. But then when Circles comes along, well, it's a different sort of way to be with people. There aren't any of them looking down on you, or making you feel like you're not worth it. [In Circles,] people take time to help me, things like build your resume, and they sit there and they interview you and help you process, and then they interview you, again, and, you know, they get you ready for that job. It's their attitudes, their support, and their time and caring that makes you feel like, okay, I can do this.

The interactions occurring at Circles, thus, are a noticeable departure from those that people living in poverty typically experience at other local human services agencies.

### **Longmont Circles' Second-Order Model of Social Change**

By employing a communicative approach to building a cross-class community, the Circles program uses communicative practices in a way that is different from most other antipoverty programs, especially programs that employ, *first-order* models of change that seek to "help marginalized, community-based groups become part of the mainstream" (Pearce, 1998, p. 275). For example, first-order models frequently address the problem of poverty by offering education to people living in poverty, teaching them strategies to adapt to the expectations of the majority, or by providing aid, giving people living in poverty resources to subsist; in those cases, the programs focus on people's immediate needs and integrating them into the larger society but do not seek to change structural inequities and institutional practices that keep people from moving out of poverty.

First-order charity models, for instance, teach people to share their resources (e.g., money, clothing, and food) with individuals who have less resources or less access to resources.

According to Artz (2001), charity

often helps ameliorate some temporary yet urgent condition . . . such as shoveling a neighbor's walk after a snowstorm or helping a stranger change a flat tire . . . [and] both the giver and receiver benefit from such charitable acts and, importantly, the pressing problem gets mostly . . . resolved. (p. 240)

However, because charity models tend to ignore the systemic reasons that lead to some people having abundant resources, whereas others do not, they are especially disparaged by social justice communication researchers. For example, Artz asserted that charity models largely are ineffective at producing social change because they

impl[y] that the poor or oppressed are less competent and less able (or at least less lucky!) than those who have more social, cultural, and economic capital . . . [and that people who] extend charity often assume that, although inequality is unfortunate, it is not fundamentally a consequence of any act or practice by institutions, agencies, or those better off. (p. 240)

To illustrate this point, Artz (2001) offered the following example of The Hunger Site, an organization that adopts a charity approach to solving the problem of people being hungry:

Consider "The Hunger Site," a popular website that records up to a million hits a day from users thereby generating corporate donations. The website demonstrates that Americans care about others. "It's a well-meaning idea that works. Net-surfers who visit it do so in good faith," writes Flood (2000). "But," he caustically adds, "most utterly miss the irony. Here's a site that lets comfortable First-Worlders feel virtuous about

tossing crumbs to the less-fortunate, but fails to even question the appalling inequities of wealth distribution, courtesy of global corporate capitalism, that make the site necessary in the first place. And it's underwritten by some of the very folks who helped create the problem" (p. 49). (p. 240)

Although not all first-order models of change adopt a charity model, and some aid those who are marginalized and underresourced (e.g., to acquire education and/or material resources), first-order models *only* facilitate changes in the specific group or population being addressed (in the case of the present research, people living in poverty), and, as such, those one-way models do not expect individuals in the dominant group or population to make any changes or accommodations, and, perhaps most important, those models do not seek to make any structural changes.

In contrast, the Circles program aspires to be, and in some ways, represents a two-way model of social change, where individuals from both minority and majority groups come together to learn how to build high-quality interpersonal relationships and to collectively tackle both obstacles facing individuals living in poverty and structural impediments to moving out of poverty. For example, as Ally Connie described:

I am amazed that this vision is so amazingly layered. Circles understands that it isn't just about one person and poverty, it's about all the different pieces that go into it: [Circles] has addressed the individual [piece], they've addressed the community [piece], they've addressed the big picture [piece], and [they've addressed] the way that obstacles are still in the way and what systemic changes have to occur. Their vision is wide and deep.

Pearce (1998) described the focus of such models and programs as *second-order change*, which occurs when individuals collectively create "heuristic social spaces for forms of communication that would otherwise not occur" (p. 275). As a result of the creation of those

spaces, according to Pearce, when second-order change occurs, “it does not just move the players into new positions on the board, it changes the board itself” (p. 275). Circles certainly seeks to engage in such second-order change, as the interactions that occur there and some of the CCPs employed certainly subvert dominant discourse about poverty by encouraging people who live in poverty and those who do not to create and engage in new ways of communicating, and, as documented in Chapter 4, the Longmont Circles program is relatively successful in building equitable cross-class interpersonal relationships and community among participants.

### **Social Capital as an Inadequate Explanation for Participant Change**

Despite the fact that Longmont Circles aspires to be and, in some ways, functions as a second-order model of change, it does not frame itself as such. Instead, Circles foregrounds the idea that to move out of poverty, participants should build multiple types of capital, and, hence, Circles aims to aid those participants—particularly people living in poverty—in building financial capital (e.g., moving out of poverty) indirectly by building social capital, which, Circles asserts, fills a deficiency in their lives.

As explained in Chapter 2, *social capital* is defined as connections between people, the aggregate of resources that arise from those connections, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that follow (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1983, 1984; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993, 2000). The Circles program is premised on the notion that building social capital is designed to aid people living in poverty—who may have less social capital and less opportunity to develop it than do people from middle- or upper class backgrounds—to connect to the social and material resources necessary to solve everyday problems (e.g., fixing a broken car or writing a resume, two examples commonly referred to in Circles’ materials). According to S. C. Miller (2008),

“What truly helps families find a way out of poverty is to become part of a community of people with different socioeconomic backgrounds who have learned to care about one another” (p. 13).

To accomplish this goal, Circles facilitates the creation of deliberate interpersonal relationships between Circle Leaders (i.e., people living in poverty) and Allies (i.e., volunteers who are not living in poverty), which exposes them to business, political, and human services leaders in the broader community. By doing so, Circles argues that the program can aid people living in poverty to develop the breadth and depth of social connections that middle- and upper class people already have, and that through those connections, people living in poverty can take advantage of the many new opportunities presented to them and, ideally, flourish socially and financially.

However, framing people living in poverty as being relationally deficient (and, relatedly, as lacking opportunities, skills, and resources necessary to develop those interpersonal relationships) reflects a deficit model that suggests that people living in poverty are responsible for their plight because they lack certain skills (e.g., public speaking skills and budgeting skills), qualities (e.g., resourcefulness and thriftiness), and resources (e.g., social connections and money) that are necessary to moving out of poverty. By doing so, this deficit approach ignores the many structural reasons (many of which were documented in Chapter 2) that contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. In fact, one structural problem that propagates poverty is the use of the deficit model (also explained in Chapter 2) that Circles promotes (e.g., through its training and marketing materials), which is influenced substantially by Payne’s (1996; Payne et al., 2001) work on a poverty mindset and hidden rules of social class.

Moreover, Circles does not currently, but should, foreground the notion that people *not* living in poverty also would benefit from the ability to foster cross-class social connections,

including connections with people living in poverty. Furthermore, what prevents such cross-class relationships from occurring is not the deficiencies of people who are poor but, rather, that how people build interpersonal relationships in U.S. society privileges middle- and upper class ways of interacting and frames people living in poverty as having less desirable skills, qualities, and values. As such, typical cross-class interactions (e.g., as some participants described, between human service providers and people living in poverty, or between coworkers of different social classes) foster further divisions between members of different social classes (see Chapter 4 for participants' descriptions of these interactions) rather than dismantle inequity.

Fortunately, despite Circles describing its generative mechanisms through a deficit approach, the data collected in this study demonstrate that the Longmont Circles program is very effective in fostering cross-class relationship building. Furthermore, the data reflect that although the Circles program is moderately successful in what it claims to do (i.e., build individuals' social capital through the interpersonal relationships developed within the small group of Longmont Circles participants and the few connections that snowball as a result of those relationships), the Circles program is even more successful promoting a practice of which it makes no mention in official documents (e.g., the Circles manual) or descriptions (e.g., during training): aiding participants to acquire resources and competencies necessary to building cross-class social capital. Thus, rather than building the social capital of impoverished participants, what Circles essentially creates is a type of capital whereby participants—Leaders and Allies alike—gain knowledge and resources through the type of interactions and interpersonal relationships (many of them fostered by CCPs) in which they engage during Circles' activities, and, as a result, Circles create opportunities to collectively redefine the types of interactions that typically are privileged in dominant U.S. discourses (including the discourses of Payne, 1996;

Payne et al., 2001; and of the national Circles program). As such, as explained below, what the program actually fosters is *interactional capital*.

### **Conceptualizing Interactional Capital**

Although the study of “capital” is grounded in a long tradition of research, “interactional capital” is a new and relatively unique idea. *Social capital*, as previously explained, references the aggregate number and quality of existing relationships that an individual has and the resources that become available to him or her as a result of those connections. In contrast, *interactional capital* represents *the aggregate of communicative resources (e.g., shared knowledge, coconstructed understandings of the other, and types of communication possible within interactions) produced between interactants that create and facilitate community and social capital*.

CCPs represent an integral part of the development of interactional capital at Circles. By employing particular CCPs, Longmont Circles provides opportunities for participants to experience, enact, and critically reflect on alternatives to normative communicative practices that commonly are used in group settings. Engaging in these alternative CCPs challenges people to try new ways of relating to and communicating with other group members, and it provides a space for participants to receive feedback from group members about those communicative practices. The CCPs, thus, create opportunities for particular processes to occur—including participants changing their conceptions of other group members, trying out new ways of communicating, and receiving feedback from others—that become resources held among group members that can be used to build interpersonal relationships and community within the group. In relation to the development of interactional capital, the CCPs (described in Chapter 4) that participants engage in during Longmont Circles (a) encourage new and different forms of

communication with other group members, (b) build their understanding of how to foster and maintain cross-class interpersonal relationships, and (c) create opportunities to practice the type of skills necessary to build and maintain those connections and develop social capital. As a result, these CCPs facilitate the constitutive growth of interpersonal relationships and formation of a sense of community within the group.

Interactional capital is particularly remarkable in the Longmont Circles group because it is built in cross-class interactions, which, as Circles' program developers (e.g., S. C. Miller, 2008; Payne, 1996; Payne et al., 2001) and participants noted, is rare. Furthermore, what is important about interactional capital is that it privileges capital at the interactional level, meaning capital that is produced *between* people (e.g., between two interactants) and *among* people (e.g., among members of a social network or community), not just *within* people (i.e., individually, as a skills-based model would suggest). Whereas social capital, and, in this case, community, are the desired *results* of interactional capital, interactional capital represents the accumulation of ways of communicating (and accompanying knowledge and skills) that lead people to those goals.

Hence, rather than trying to assimilate people living in poverty to a middle-class way of communicating, interactional capital describes the types of communication built between or among people that require change from all interactants. As applied to Circles, building interactional capital leads, in some ways, to some instances of second-order change, in that Leaders and Allies cocreate new patterns of interacting rather than expecting only minority groups (i.e., people living in poverty) to adapt to majority ways of interacting.

### **Communication Concepts Related to Interactional Capital**

Although interactional capital has not yet been explored in communication scholarship, some scholars have investigated similar concepts, such as communication capital and interactional competence. These related concepts are explained below.

**Communication capital.** First, a related concept is *communication capital*, which has a wide variety of uses in academic and practical literature (e.g., as a strategic marketing tool, as investment in physical communication towers and equipment, as a means to foster resilience and disaster-preparedness within communities, and as social bonds and bridges between people; for a review, see Matos & Nobre, 2009). Most relevant to the current study is the small body of literature that defines communication capital as the types of communication or patterns of interaction that facilitate social problem solving and that help a community to sustain itself, where “communication” is defined as the symbolic activity of meaning construction and message processing. In that conception, communication capital references resources that are available to a community that can be drawn on to help that community sustain itself, such as a fast and efficient pattern of information dissemination, established channels that connect community leaders to community constituents, pluralism in ideas on public issues, and a community climate that values the expression of differences in opinions (Jeffres, 2010). In general, literature on communication capital is more interested in long-term resources and investments of community sustainability rather than short-term necessities associated with community crises. According to Jeffres, Jian, and Yoon (2007), this communication capital includes four dimensions:

- (1) Interpersonal discussion of social problems and programs across contexts that include family and friends, the workplace, the neighborhood and community;
- (2) Discussion of social problems and programs in the non-work organizational context;

(3) Attention to public issues and business in the media; and

(4) Surveillance uses of the media. (p. 8)

Communication capital in this interactional, resource-based framing has been studied in relation to a variety of, largely, interpersonal contexts (e.g., adolescent language use; see Thurlow, 2003, 2005) or the communication resources needed to solve problems in business contexts (see, e.g., Malmelin, 2007). For example, Aggestam (2006) explored communication capital in the workplace as an entrepreneurial competency that is grounded in networking, with communication capital being the means by which organizational actors leverage evidence of their social network. As another example, Jeffres (2008) developed an audit to inventory interpersonal communication capital in an urban community, asking questions about how frequently participants discussed with others social problems (e.g., crime, poverty, and poor cross-cultural interpersonal relationships) or programs designed to fight those problems, and how enthusiastic or reluctant participants were to join those conversations.

Communication capital is related to social capital, and actually includes social capital as community resource that, most often, positively contributes to sustainability. As Matos and Nobre (2009) explained:

In addition to the features generally associated with capital (resources, quantifiers, targets, results) and communication (information, flow, conversation, debate), there exists an optional but welcome correlation between communicational capital and social capital. It was precisely this movement that empowered the communicators as people (not only people as communicators) and communities to regard their aspects of humanity (not only those of assets and capital). Confidence, imagination, and “psychological/spiritual support” [from Silvan, 1999, p. 28] are at the very basis for collective mobilization-

engagement-action, as much as the managerial calculation and entrepreneurial pursuit of profit.” (p. 8)

The literature on communication capital is important for three reasons. First, that literature promotes the idea that rich, meaningful, and instrumental interactions between members of a community encompass more than simply the number, frequency, value, and quality of people in a network (as suggested by a social capital framing). Second, communication capital highlights the importance of communication being valued interactionally, focusing on the experience of communication among people (e.g., community members) rather than transactionally framed as information exchange (Thurlow, 2001). Third, the communication capital literature suggests that the relevance of an interaction to its social outcome is important, and, as such, that literature promotes the idea that certain types of communication or communication resources are better designed to accomplish important social goals (e.g., social problem solving).

Communication capital, thus, is a useful concept, although it typically examines resources held among a large population of people (e.g., a neighborhood or a city) and it largely ignores phenomena occurring between people. However, in that communication capital is tied to community-level problems, it can be viewed as a type of community-level interactional capital (in line with the way that communication capital has been defined by other scholars). Furthermore, the boundaries placed on the study of social capital “exclude specific communication behaviors that are instrumental in helping individuals deal with their personal, family or work problems” (Jeffres, Jian, & Yoon, in press, p. 7), in favor of studying communication that promotes civic engagement and collective problem solving.

The concept of *capital*, which generally explains the creation of value by transforming parts of the natural world into means of production and products, creating resources or investments that can be drawn on to accomplish particular means when needs arise, further differentiates these concepts. For economic capital, value creation occurs through the accumulation of monetary resources (e.g., money or assets) that can be used to buy a nearly infinite variety of goods and services. Similarly, *social capital* creates value from the systems of trust and reciprocity within an individual's social network that can be drawn on by that person for various purposes (e.g., for career networking, receiving social support, or gaining access to resources). In the case of *communication capital*, this value creation references collective (rather than individual) resources that a community can use to spread information and/or solve problems (Jeffres, 2010). Finally, in *interactional capital*, value is derived from the creation and aggregation of shared practices (i.e., CCPs) or shared knowledge (e.g., coconstructed views of group members) that interactants can use to facilitate community building and to create social capital. As such, whereas *communication capital* may help individuals to discuss and solve social problems, *interactional capital* helps people to cocreate new forms of communication that build or improve social capital and community, without reinforcing marginalizing discursive patterns.

**Interactional competence.** Second, *interactional competence* (introduced in Chapter 4) describes “the interactional architecture of a specific discursive practice, including knowledge of how to employ linguistic, pragmatic, and interactional resources in the construction of a discursive practice” (Young, 2011, p. 434). Interactional competence usually is explored in relation to cross-cultural communication, as well as used as a way to expand language instruction

to talk-in-interaction (see, e.g., Tracy, 2002), in response to the critique that language instruction was too focused on language as a functional tool.

Interactional competence focuses, for the most part, on interactants' understanding of and use of communication (both recognizing communication and responding) in various cultural or role-based exchanges. As Oksaar (1990) explained, interactional competence involves

the ability of a person, in interactional situations to carry out and interpret verbal, paralinguistic, non-verbal and extraverbal communicative actions in two roles, that of the speaker and that of the hearer, according to the sociocultural and psychological rules of the group. (p. 530)

Put more simply, interactional competence has to do with recognizing what to say and understanding how to say it in a particular situation. For example, interactional competence would be evidenced in the understanding that communication with a grocery store clerk likely should be kept short and informational, whereas communication with a friend should be longer and relational. Not surprisingly, such interactional competence has been studied in educational contexts, such as students' conversations with other students (see, e.g., Ishida, 2009) or with teachers (see, e.g., Young, 2007). It also is easy to imagine that errors in interactional competence (i.e., responses that do not conform to others' expectations and failure to understand what is expected) occur frequently in instances of cross-cultural communication (e.g., second-language learning) or cross-class communication, and particularly in situations where interactants are less knowledgeable about what is expected and/or how to convey messages appropriately.

Like interactional capital, interactional competence privileges communication *between* or *among* people, foregrounding "the construction of a shared mental context [including, e.g., the

social, institutional, political, and historical circumstances that extend beyond the interaction] through the collaboration of all interactional partners” (Young, 2011, p. 440). Furthermore, according to Mehan (1982), “competence becomes interactional” (p. 65), both in the sense that competence is necessary for effective interaction and because competence is available in interactions between people. Kramsch (1986) further explained that effective interaction “presupposes not only a shared knowledge of the world . . . but also the construction of a shared internal context . . . built through the collaborative efforts of the interactional partners” (p. 367).

Interactional competence also foregrounds interactants’ expectations about how an interaction will play out. In this context, interactional competence is linked to and draws from an expansive body of research on discursive practice (see, e.g., Tracy, 2002; Young, 2007, 2008, 2009) that foregrounds the notion that “because discursive practices recur, participants have expectations about what happens in a practice and what linguistic and nonverbal resources people employ in constructing the practice” (Young, 2011, p. 427). As such, individuals’ interactional competence is evidenced in their discourse and can be observed in relation to how closely they meet or diverge from others’ expectations about discursive practices.

Interactional competence is beneficial to exploring interactional capital because it highlights the coconstruction of discursive practices and the idea that meaning is negotiated in interaction. As such, the interactional capital concept can explain how high-quality interpersonal relationships between people living in poverty and people who do not are built and sustained through communication resources.

Furthermore, interactional competence functions as an alternative to a skills-based approach to interaction. *Communication skills*, as Haslett and Bowen (1989) suggested, help individuals to “develop self-identity, establish social relationships with others, and provide the

basis for collective social activity” (p. 27), but as Fairclough (1999) point out, the notion of communication *skills* fails to adequately capture the complexity of the relationship between learning skills and employing them in interaction, as well as the difficulty of transferring skills across contexts. To illustrate the difficulty in transferring skills across contexts, Fairclough explained that “it is inviting disaster to assume that if you have learnt to interview candidates for admission to university, you know how to interview personalities on a television chat show” (p. 80). In contrast, as Fairclough pointed out:

Discourse is a complex matching of models with immediate needs in which what emerges may be radically different from any model, ambivalent between models, or a baffling mixture of models, and where flair and creativity may have more impact than skill. (p. 80)

Fairclough (1999) also warned that a potential danger of privileging a communication skills perspective was the likelihood of too simplistically characterizing discourse as a technique and, by doing so, ignoring how power factors into social determinations of what forms of discourse are accepted and which are marginalized. As Fairclough explained, “From this point of view, any reduction of discourse to skills is complicit with efforts on the part of those who have power to impose social practices they favour by getting people to see them as mere techniques” (p. 81). Because interactional competence views communication as a constitutive process whereby meaning is negotiated in interaction, the concept avoids reducing communication to a functional tool or to a set of techniques to be mastered, and it allows for a potential critical understanding of how other processes (e.g., power) are negotiated during interaction.

However, because interactional competence most typically is studied in conversation analysis and discourse analysis, communication is studied at the level of the utterance (focusing

on, for instance, turn-taking, structure and sequence, and intonation, or on analyses of nonverbal communication, such as gesture, gaze, and body positioning). In contrast, interactional capital looks more broadly at communication at the level of interaction. Furthermore, because interactional competence privileges communication at the level of the utterance, it would be much more difficult to study the development of interpersonal relationships and community within the entire Longmont Circles group. Hence, whereas *interactional competence* attunes the eye to the interactional processes of meaning negotiation that occur during talk, *interactional capital* focuses on resources produced in interaction that can be used to build high-quality interpersonal relationships. As such, interactional capital is a more useful concept than is interactional competence for explaining the relationship-building processes occurring at Circles.

In sum, interactional capital, in many ways, blends together the two concepts of communication capital and interactional competence. From communication capital, interactional capital borrows a focus on capital, foregrounding the use of communication resources to accomplish particular goals (e.g., social problem solving, as is the case in communication capital; or interpersonal relationship and community building, as is the case in interactional capital); from interactional competence, interactional capital borrows a focus on interaction, highlighting the idea that meanings are negotiated during interaction. Interactional capital, however, is more than communication competence, different from interactional competence, and different still from social capital; interactional capital may be the missing concept that describes resources that interactants create and then draw from to build and sustain social capital. Interactional capital, thus, represents the aggregate of communicative resources produced between and among interactants that creates and facilitates community and social capital. The

next section of this chapter explores three processes whereby interactional capital is developed at Longmont Circles.

### **The Development of Interactional Capital at Longmont Circles**

Unlike many of the monetary resources of financial capital (e.g., money or assets), the communication resources of interactional capital cannot simply be shared or exchanged; instead, these resources must be developed between and among participants during dyadic and group interactions. At Longmont Circles, the development of interactional capital is facilitated by three processes: (a) the development of shared knowledge of how to build social capital, (b) the coconstruction of understandings of others, and (c) the accumulation of types of communication possible within interactions that can build social capital and community. Each process is explained below in relation to how the communication resources of interactional capital are visible in Circles' practices.

**The development of shared knowledge of how to build social capital.** First, at a foundational level, interactional capital is facilitated at Longmont Circles through the development of shared knowledge of how to build social capital. This process is foundational in the sense that participants need to develop a base of shared knowledge about how social capital can be built in their particular group context before they deliberately attempt to build that social capital (e.g., relationships and community) within the group.

Circles' use of some CCPs encourages this process, such as the CCPs of Appreciations and practicing reciprocity. For example, an Ally explained the impact that the CCP of Appreciations—where group members go around the circle sharing verbal acknowledgments of something positive about other members—has made on the group's shared knowledge of how to build interpersonal relationships:

One thing that has really changed our group is Appreciations, not just doing them but learning that things like that should be said. No one at [my workplace] really ever takes the time to tell me that I am appreciated . . . but doing [Appreciations] at [Circles,] has planted this seed in [group members'] heads that that's a good thing to do to, that it is good for the group. And when I hear people tell me [that they appreciate me], either during [the formal activity] or just while we're talking, I feel a closer bond.

As another example, a Leader explained how the CCP of practicing reciprocity helps group members to develop shared knowledge of how to build social capital:

There are times when I realize that I never learned how to build friendships with middle-class folks, times where I see that [my perspective on building friendship] is more suited to people who are more like me. But I wanted to, I needed to grow, and I have. One thing that [Circles] has taught me is that being a friend means giving back. We [Circles participants] call it "reciprocity" [and we've] learned it here from doing things at meetings, like washing dishes or bringing something for the Reciprocity Table. It's not giving [in the sense of] giving something, in particular, like money or a gift, but it's just the idea of giving, or giving something like time or effort that counts. And because I'm giving, and [other participants] are giving, we're building friendships.

As these examples illustrate, engaging in some CCPs offers opportunities for participants to build shared knowledge about how to create and sustain high-quality interpersonal relationships. In particular, the Circles training process is a time when participants first are exposed to some of these CCPs, and, as such, represents a primary opportunity to develop shared knowledge about how to build social capital. For example, during training, participants learn various strategies promoted by the Circles organization for building social capital and

community, such as the CCPs of New and Good, listening pairs, and, as mentioned above, Appreciations and practicing reciprocity. Participants continue to develop this shared knowledge—first learned at training—during Circles meetings.

Participants also develop shared knowledge of how to build social capital through talk. For example, participants occasionally engage in metacommunication about how to talk to each other in ways that can build interpersonal relationships and community. For example, during an inner-circle meeting (a smaller group of two Leaders [noted below as Leaders A and B<sup>1</sup>] and four Allies [noted below as Allies A, B, C, and D), some Allies asked Leader A to talk about the types of jobs for which he wanted to apply. When Leader A answered with little detail, other group members pointed out his reluctance to share, and the group discussion, as shown below, evolved into an opportunity for group members to develop interactional capital during talk:

Allly A: [Leader A], it seems like you're not willing to share things with us today.

Leader A: No. No. That's not on me. I share a lot, it's just—

Allly B: You are just shutting down our questions and—

Leader A: No. I don't know why we have to keep going over this job application stuff again and again. You're just all backing me into a corner today. You just want to jump on me for not doing this or not doing that, and I don't want to be attacked.

Allly A: Let's all step back for a minute. [Leader A], it sounds like you're feeling attacked and none of us here wants you to feel like that. Let's think about how we're going about this; maybe it's the way we are approaching it that isn't helpful. Let's start again. I don't want to start stepping into parent mode and I know that that wouldn't be helpful at all.

Leader A: Okay. Thank you.

Ally B: [Leader A], we want to be helpful, all of us here. Me, [Ally A], [Ally C], [Ally D] and [Leader B], we want to be helpful in the way that works best for you.

Ally B: And we understand how frustrating it is to be job searching. [Laughs] I got divorced—twice—during [times where I was] looking for a job! [Group laughs]

Ally A: Okay, so [Leader A], I hear that you are feeling jumped on, and no one wants you to feel like that. We are friends first.

Leader B: Right. Right.

Ally A: Okay, so [Leader A], what can we do and what can you do next time you feel attacked?

Leader A: Well—

Ally A: And I mean what can we do to let you know that we are here for you, as friends?

Leader A: Well, I think that, uh, well, I want to say thanks. I sometimes think it's good to say that, just to say we are friends, and that we are here as friends, you know? And, also not to just have me talk about my problems and my issues, or Leader B's problems and Leader B's issues all the time. Friends, uh, with friends, there has to be balance. So that is something.

Leader B: Yeah, same with me. It would be good to hear other people, so I'm not on the spot all the time and so I'm not feeling like the only one . . . who is struggling.

Ally A: Good. Great. Thank you.

Group members then went around in a circle and each person shared a little about him or herself, about jobs that he or she had struggled to get or wanted to apply for, or “dream jobs” that he or she always had wanted. When it was Leader A's turn, he was much more disclosive in response

to the question about which he formally had been reluctant to share. Moreover, after this short discussion, the group seemed much more cohesive and positive.

A few months later, I followed up with some group members and asked how inner-circle meetings were going. Ally A referenced metacommunication about relationship building when he described:

I think one thing we've all learned is that we've all got different ideas about how to come together [as a group], and sometimes we need to figure out how to do that, how to talk to each other and how to be friends. We've all got different perspectives on how to be, um, supportive to each other, but we all think our way is the right way. We forget that there is more than one way to do things. So it's a process, but we talk about it, and then we learn to be more unified, and how to speak others' language, I suppose.

Leaders A and B also commented on the ongoing process of learning how to build interpersonal relationships. Jokingly, Leader A kidded that Leader B is "learning how to share his toys, and how to make friends, how to get people to like him." Leader B laughed, and added:

Yeah, but seriously, [Leader A] is right, I have learned how to make friends. [Before Circles,] if I didn't get along with someone, I just wasn't friends with them. But [through Circles,] I've had to think about how to get along with people, with my group, and that's really helped.

This growing knowledge of relationship and community building represented capital for Longmont Circles' participants because group members were able to draw on this accumulation of information, as experienced from CCPs, to build interpersonal relationships and community. In the example given above, members of Leader A's circle drew from their shared accumulation of knowledge to develop ways of communicating with each other that were mutually beneficial

and that created a stronger group community that was effective at meeting participants' needs (e.g., relationship building and problem solving). Similarly, a different Leader described building shared knowledge through practicing reciprocity as a way to increase individuals' social capital and to communicate intentions of building friendships with others. By accumulating this shared knowledge of how to build social capital and community, participants developed interactional capital.

**The coconstruction of understandings of others.** Second, interactional capital was facilitated at Longmont Circles through the process of participants coconstructing understandings of each other. By engaging with others as equals and creating opportunities for others to describe themselves, participants could move beyond stereotypes about class and socioeconomic status differences.

Engaging in some CCPs facilitates the coconstruction of these shared understandings. For example, the CCP of sharing narratives and/or goals created space for participants to talk about themselves with fellow group members and to share themselves (e.g., their personalities, backgrounds, values, and aspirations) in ways that might not arise during less structured interactions. By engaging in this CCP, participants abandoned class-based views of other participants and collectively created shared understandings of others. As an Ally explained:

There have been opportunities to share parts of my story, my history, with [other Circles participants], and that has really helped [my Leader to] see me in a different light. I think that before [sharing these stories], she lumped me in with the other people [not living in poverty] who have looked down on her or dismissed her, but by learning more about who I am as a person and what I'm all about, she sees me differently now. And I never said

“I’m like this,” or “I’m not like that,” I just told her little things about myself here and there and she came to her own conclusions.

As another example, the CCP of the poverty simulation creates a space for nonimpoverished participants (as well as some community members who are not members of any Boulder County Circles’ groups) to learn, on a more general level, what it means to live in poverty. The simulation serves as an opportunity for many Allies to, as Ally Betsy described, “put [themselves] in others’ shoes and see what it’s like to live in poverty.” Even though the simulation has many game-like or silly aspects (e.g., assigning participants small tokens to represent household items, such as a washing machine or refrigerator, which can be traded, sold for paper money, or even stolen), there were many other realistic aspects (e.g., having participants complete actual human services forms requesting government aid). As such, it is an opportunity for some Allies to experience aspects of what it may be like to live in poverty, and it leads many Allies to reconstruct their images of what it means to live in poverty and of Leaders they know who live in poverty. For instance, at a community dinner meeting after the simulation, the following discussion occurred between an Ally and a Leader:

Ally: I couldn’t believe how long those forms were, the ones from [the poverty simulation] the other night. Are those for real?

Leader: Mm hmmm, and you have to fill them out again and again and again, a new one for each [agency] you go to. It never ends.

Ally: And you have to wait like that at [the agencies], for hours sometimes?

Leader: Oh yes, and if you get there too late, or if [employees] are moving slow, they’ll just say, “We’re closed now, come back tomorrow,” and there’s nothing you can do about it. Another whole day wasted.

Ally: I never knew. Seriously, I never knew. Well [pauses for a long moment], now I do. [Leader], I see you differently now, knowing what you deal with. I thought I knew what it was like, but clearly, I didn't have a clue.

Leader: Mm hmmm.

Ally: And I know you, you're tough, you're strong, and I'm sure you'd persevere despite crap like this, but I just didn't realize how, um, annoying it must be. I don't know that I could do it. I'm sure a lot of people can't.

Through these opportunities to share narratives and goals during the poverty simulation, and in other Circles' interactions, participants develop understandings of their fellow group members, as a Leader described, "as we really are, not just what you expect us to be, and that goes for both Allies and Leaders [expectations of each other]." As another example, Leader Carla said, "When I talk about myself to my circle and share things I've been through . . . I become more than just someone who is struggling, I become Carla." Similarly, a Leader compared his interactions at Circles to his those at local human services agencies:

At [local human services agencies,] I'm looked at [by staff] as just another person who's trying to get a handout or mooch off the government. They couldn't care less about me; it's all "Take a seat," "Fill out this form," "Wait for hours while I ignore you," [and] then, "Oh sorry, we can't help you, come back tomorrow." It's just dehumanizing. But here [at Circles], I've got dignity. I'm treated with respect. People listen to me, they hear me, really hear me. And they've figured out who I am, which is something [human services employees] never bothered to do.

Interestingly, in at least one instance, engaging in these CCPs helped a participant to coconstruct a shared understanding of herself. As described in Chapter 4, through the use of

CCPs that were encouraged by Circles, Leader Mary realized her dream to found a small business. As she described, during a group discussion,

we started talking about the decorating for the Christmas party and my eyes just lit up, and I asked, “Ooohhh, can I do the decorating?” I felt like the group just pulled something out of me that nobody had a clue. Including me, it was something I loved, but had forgotten about . . . [and] the group didn’t shoot down my ideas. . . . People started saying that I should go into business for myself. Eventually, things evolved to what my business is now, but had I not expressed my desire, and had people not responded to me like they did, I wouldn’t be here.

She also further explained:

Doing things like drawing how I saw myself in the future and doing [listening pairs], where I talked to other people about my goals and seeing myself as a business owner, all those things helped me realize that I wanted to own my own small business, like I have now. [Before Circles,] I never had thought about that and definitely never had talked about it with people who actually believed in me and in [my ideas].

Thus, through the types of communication foregrounded in Circles—including group discussion and the CCPs of sharing goals and engaging in listening pairs—Mary shared a side of herself of which even she was not fully aware.

As such, interactional capital is produced at Circles during communication in which participants collectively construct understandings of others that are steeped in interactants’ experiences rather than in stereotypes. For example, there are many occasions where CCPs (e.g., the poverty simulation) encourage participants to coconstruct narratives of the experience of individuals living in poverty; similarly, there are occasions where CCPs (e.g., sharing narratives

and/or goals) encouraged participants to coconstruct narratives of the experience of individuals *not* living in poverty. As described in Chapter 4, these practices often significantly alter participants' prior understandings of cross-class others.

The relative ease of changing participants' preconceived notions likely was facilitated by the particular group of participants drawn to Circles, including both Allies and Circle Leaders, all of whom expressed a willingness to change and a desire to help others. In their volunteer applications (which all potential Allies complete prior to beginning Circles), Allies described their reasons for wanting to participate in Circles, which included wanting to learn about poverty and the experiences of those living in it, and aiding those living in poverty in their efforts to move out of poverty. For example, an Ally wrote that she "loves to help out others" and is "gentle, kind, compassionate, and non-judgmental." Another Ally wrote that she wanted to become an Ally to "learn things that will improve the quality of my life, my children[']s lives], my neighbors['] lives] and on and on." Similarly, in Circle Leaders' applications, Leaders reported wanting to learn, grow, and make new friends through their Circles experience. This eagerness to change—from both people living in poverty and those who do not—likely stands in contrast to other programs that seek to aid people living in poverty (e.g., human services organizations), which typically represent first-order (or one-way) models of change.

These coconstructed understandings represent capital for Longmont Circles' participants because group members are able to draw on them, as shared resources, to build high-quality interpersonal relationships and community. Participants noted the importance of these shared understandings of others as being integral to fostering a sense of community within the group. As an Ally described, "It was by learning about [a particular Leader]—hearing his stories, changing my old stereotypes, seeing him in action—that we really bonded, became friends."

Similarly, another Leader asserted that “we have built a community, and we did it because we took the time to learn about each other, and to treat each other well, and to be willing to listen, and be true friends.” As these quotes demonstrate, participants’ collectively constructed, shared understandings of fellow group members serve as an important foundation for developing and sustaining social capital and community.

**The accumulation of types of communication that can build social capital and community.** Third, interactional capital is facilitated at Longmont Circles through participants’ collective accumulation of types of communication possible within interactions that build social capital and community. By engaging in Circles’ training and in various CCPs, participants learn about and have opportunities to practice types of communication that are different, in some ways, from what they normally enact in everyday interactions. Furthermore, by enacting these CCPs and getting feedback on how they are received by other group members, participants collectively produce and refine communication resources that are used to build social capital and community within the group.

In addition to practicing and refining the particular CCPs that are encouraged by the Circles organization, the group also collectively develops new types of communicating. For example, an Ally spoke about the group’s willingness to experiment to coconstruct ways of interacting, and, as he described, running group meetings that do not privilege one particular group’s normative experience at the expense of the other group:

The way the group runs these meetings is to be inclusive and to help bring people out and feel comfortable being who they are, and, eventually, people do. [In meetings,] we find a common ground for doing things. It’s not just my way of doing things or your way; it’s

not that we use a middle-class way or a rich way or a poor way. We take a new path, we're willing to try out new things.

Over time, as the group develops and becomes experienced in using these particular CCPs and new ways of interacting, members develop interactional capital, or resources that they draw on to equalize cross-class participant interpersonal relationships and to enhance group relationships and community.

Although there likely are a large variety of types of communication that the group accumulates that build social capital and community, two examples of these types of communication are given below: communication that (a) dismantles class differences and equalizes cross-class participant relationships, and (b) strengthens participants' bonds to each other and/or to the group.

Sometimes, the types of communication employed build and enhance community within the Longmont Circles group by dismantling class differences and equalizing cross-class participant relationships. To develop these egalitarian ways of communicating, participants experiment with different CCPs that are encouraged by Circles, receive feedback from group members, and create new ways of interacting in response to that feedback. Some CCPs that are encouraged by Circles have the effect of making class differences more apparent within the group (e.g., the CCP of learning new vocabularies, which encourages participants to define and label three distinct classes) but they do not lead to interactional capital. Other CCPs encourage participants to deemphasize class differences (e.g., the CCP of using communicative practices that are sensitive of class, which encourages participants to not dress or speak in ways that emphasize class divisions), but they, too, do not lead to interactional capital. However, other CCPs encourage participants to see that differences within class groups (e.g., differences among

Allies) are just as prominent as differences between class groups (e.g., differences between Allies and Leaders). In doing so, these CCPs dismantle some participants' preexisting beliefs of class divisions and equalize participants' interpersonal relationships, and they serve as a form of interactional capital that participants draw on to develop community.

For example, the CCP of New and Good makes space for participants to share anything they want about themselves with the entire group, and, by doing so, helps participants to see the positive attributes of other group members that are not linked to traditional status variables (e.g., money, career success, and material purchases). Because New and Good promotes different responses from people than what typically is elicited through normative group interaction (e.g., small talk), the practice helps participants to share parts of themselves and events in their lives that, otherwise, may not arise in normative interactions (e.g., where interactants ask such questions as "What do you do?" that may reinforce status differences or "How are you?" that provides little opportunity for self-disclosure). As participants increasingly share their accomplishments with other group members during New and Good, they begin to share accomplishments with other group members in nonstructured interaction (e.g., when talking together during dinner), and they ask other group members questions that elicit New and Good-type responses without using the structure of the New and Good CCP. For example, as a Leader recounted:

New and Good has really helped me share things [with other people]. It's funny, but now I just tell [other Longmont Circles participants] things about myself that I would have felt really weird blurting out before. Like, at dinner, I'll say, "Hey, guess what I did last week?" and talk about cooking a healthy meal for my kids. Or during our [Inner-group meetings,] I'll start off by saying, "I'd like to tell everyone that I'm really proud that I

applied for two jobs yesterday.” Before [Circles,] I wouldn’t have thought anyone wanted to hear that stuff [but] I guess because I shared things like that [during] New and Good enough and felt like people [responded in a way that demonstrated] that they cared, so now I share them [without being asked].

Similarly, as a different Ally reported:

I’ve learned how to communicate better and [in a way that] feels like [the other person and I are] standing on equal turf. One example that comes to mind is something that I learned from doing New and Good. Instead of saying, “How are you?” now I ask people, “Tell me something good in your life, I’d love to hear what’s going well for you,” and that gets really different responses from people [because] it invites them to share [instead of] just to state their feelings. Now I learn all kinds of things [from others] instead of just doing the usual old routine of, “How are you? I’m good.” “How are you? I’m fine.”

As another example, another Leader described how she learned a form of practicing reciprocity from an Ally that, financially, she was unable to enact, but that she discussed the concept of reciprocity with her circle and, together, group members brainstormed ways of enacting reciprocity that were feasible for all participants. The Leader explained that process:

[One of my Allies] taught me that when you go to someone’s house as a friend, you are supposed to bring something to share, like wine or something to eat, because that shows that you are thankful. But I guess I wasn’t ever taught that growing up, and now I can’t really afford to do that. So when [one of my Allies] invited me over to dinner, I was a little nervous [about not being able to bring something], and I decided to just bring it up to the group [during a time when the hostess was not present at the meeting]. We decided that instead of buying food or wine, I could make a wreath, and, actually, that everyone

would bring over some kind of [handmade] decoration. So I brought a wreath I'd made, and Josephine made a candleholder and brought that, and Betsy made a [reindeer decoration]. In this case, collectively constructing the practice of bringing handmade decorations created an opportunity for all members to participate in a group ritual that demonstrated their reciprocity and participation in the group without requiring an expensive purchase.

As yet another example, the CCPs of listening pairs and engaging in recreational activities provide alternative formats for cross-class interaction that are different from normative forms of communication, and, as a result, they create some interactions that do not reinforce class differences. For instance, making chocolate mice and playing board games leads participants to communicatively showcase creative and strategic strengths that might not surface during typical group meetings or dyadic interactions. By producing and engaging in these types of communication that promote equitable interpersonal relationships, participants build relationships with others and develop shared resources of interactional capital.

In other instances, the types of communication produced by participants build and enhance community by strengthening participants' bonds to each other and/or to the group. For example, an Ally recounted using the CCP of Appreciations to strengthen friendships with fellow group members:

There are times when [the group] is having a tense moment, when we're sort of bickering with each other, and someone will just break out with an appreciation of someone else. It cuts the tension and it reminds us that what is really important is the bond we are building together. It's silly, but I know sometimes they're just saying, "I love you" in their own way. Yeah, I'm just an old hippie, but I know that's what they're saying! [Laughs]

As this Ally's example illustrates, by engaging in the CCP of Appreciations, participants gain a communication resource that they use (and sometimes adapt in different ways) to build interpersonal relationships and group community.

By engaging in these CCPs, participants create collectively held communication resources. For example, the CCP of Listening Pairs encourages participants to communicate in a particular structure that is based in equal turn taking (i.e., only disclosing as the other person listens, and then only listening as the other person discloses, for set periods of time). Because Circles' participants regularly engage in this CCP, they gain the collective skills of listening, self-disclosure, and equal turn taking, which they can combine in various ways to create forms of communication that are beneficial to facilitating mutually enjoyable cross-class interaction and that have the potential to build relationships and community within the group. As such, the accumulation of these types of communication—including the examples given above, as well as many more not documented in this report—represent capital for Longmont Circles' participants because group members were able to draw on these types of communication to build and sustain high-quality interpersonal relationships and community within the group.

In conclusion, as evidenced in these examples, the social problem of poverty is viewed more easily as a problem of communication and community through an interactional capital lens, because that lens highlights the necessity of a second-order model of change that requires change from both majority and minority group participants. When interactional capital is not privileged or understood by Circles, these same mechanisms (i.e., the use of CCPs to build social capital) risk being framed by participants as first-order models of change, which require adaptation only on one side (in this case, Leaders, who must adapt to Allies' ways of thinking and doing). For example, viewed from an interactional capital lens, the CCP of practicing reciprocity becomes a

way for Allies and Leaders to come together and find mutually beneficial ways of communicating their commitment to the group (e.g., by bringing a homemade decoration), and even redefining what that looks like in interaction. Viewed, instead, from a social capital lens, the same CCP of Appreciations (even when enacted in the same way, such as by bringing a homemade decoration) risks being understood as a way for people living in poverty to adapt to the preexisting majority practice of reciprocating friendship by providing gifts.

When interactional capital is not privileged, the risk is that people living in poverty are excluded from the normative community discourse that communicatively constructs practices that build friendship and community, and, as a result, they are encouraged to enact majority practices, even when those practices are not beneficial to growing their resources or meeting their needs. An interactional capital lens, in contrast, can examine more easily how CCPs can be created and employed to subvert dominant patterns of interaction that produce and reproduce injustice (Frey et al., 1996), and how communication can be understood as a process whereby marginalized and disenfranchised individuals can engage with and participate in communities that they have helped to create. In addition to observable processes that are facilitated by interactional capital, as described below, the process of building interactional capital affected Longmont Circles in some important ways.

### **Impact of Interactional Capital on Participants: Three Areas for Future Research**

Given the many structural factors (as opposed to individual deficits) that contribute to the perpetuation of poverty, it is wholly inadequate to explain poverty through a deficit approach, which asserts that people stay in poverty due to their personal inadequacies, including, perhaps, their lack of social capital and the skills needed to acquire it. As the previous section documented, an interactional capital approach better describes the generative mechanism of

Longmont Circles, and the processes for facilitating the development of interactional capital are evident in Circles' practices and in participants' descriptions of the program. Moreover, interactional capital affects Longmont Circles' participants, especially in relation to participants developing cross-class interpersonal relationships, in ways that are observable. However, because the interactional capital concept emerged after the interview data were analyzed, the effects of interactional capital were not the primary focus of this research. As such, the observed impacts of interactional capital on Longmont Circles' participants are framed as areas for future research on interactional capital. As described in the section, these impacts/directions for future research can be grouped into three categories based on the level at which they can be observed: effects at the individual, relational or collective, and systemic levels.

### **Effects of Interactional Capital at the Individual Level**

First, building interactional capital through Longmont Circles has effects that can be observed at the individual level, and which may be of interest to communication scholars studying interactional capital. Specifically, the communication in which people engage and the interactions they have with others at Longmont Circles causes shifts in participants' attributions of other participants' behavior, such that, through the process of building interactional capital, participants shift their attributions of the causes of poverty from primarily blaming individuals to primarily blaming structural issues. This shift in thinking is in line with a broad body of communication research on attribution theory, some of which is explained below.

**Communication research on attribution theory.** *Attribution theory* explains the cognitive and communication processes involved in people's inferences of the causes of social behavior (including communicative behavior). Although such research emerged from the field of psychology and, consequently, focused on psychological processes (e.g., Heider, 1958), the

communicative study of attributions typically explores verbal explanations of attributions (e.g., Roghaar & Vangelisti, 1996). Both of these processes are important to studying attributions, for as Manusov (2008 explained, the process of sense-making

transpires in our thoughts (cognitive attributions), and we talk it out with others (communicated attributions) . . . [and] as we talk about why we think someone acted as he or she did, we often change our minds about the attribution we originally held. (p. 247)

In general, attribution theory proposes that because people seek to predict and control their environments, they attribute behavior, events, and outcomes to either internal or external causes. Internal, or individual-focused (individualistic), explanations “focus on the personality, dispositions, abilities, and motivational states of people involved,” whereas external, or societal, explanations “emphasize situational forces and circumstances” (Sotirovic, 2003, p. 123).

Many scholars have explored factors that influence the types of attributions that individuals make. Some researchers focus on understanding how different groups of people tend to make different types of attributions. For example, G. D. Wilson (1973) showed that political conservatives, in contrast to political liberals, are more likely to make internal attributions. Other research has focused on how the way that information is communicated shapes listeners’ attributions, with the findings generally supporting the idea that information is communicated in ways that carry implicit attributions. For example, researchers have demonstrated that the source, availability, and presentation or framing of information in the media can influence individuals’ attributions (see, e.g., J. A. Howard & Levinson, 1985; Iyengar, 1991; Sotirovic, 2003). As another example, Hilton and Slugoski (1986) found that people more often make internal attributions about another’s behavior when information is communicated such that it suggests the

person is behaving abnormally or unusually (as opposed to when the circumstances affecting a person are framed as abnormal or unusual). As Sotirovic (2003) explained in her research on poverty:

Applied to explanatory judgments of poverty/welfare and crime, this [attributional tendency] would mean that the more that poor people and criminals are portrayed as unusual or abnormal, the more likely it is that their personal deficiencies and faults will be blamed for their condition or behavior. (p. 124)

One factor that often significantly affects people's attributions of causes, especially for behavior, events, and outcomes about which people do not have firsthand experience, is the media. Accordingly, attribution theory has been studied in relation to people's media-viewing habits (see, e.g., Bennett, 1996; Iyengar, 1991; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994), with that research generally showing that media coverage and portrayals significantly influence people's attributions (e.g., Kosicki, 2002; Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011; Yanovitzky & Bennett, 1999).

In their study of the media's influence on people's attributions, Gottlieb and Ickes (1978) found that even "specific bits of communicated information [can] lead to changes in attributors' perception of the situation" (p. 263). For example, Sotirovic's (2003) research illustrated how the particular framing of media stories about crime and welfare affect viewers' explanatory and attributional judgments of the behavior of the people involved; specifically, the more personalized the stories (e.g., including specific details about the people's lives portrayed in news stories), the more viewers attributed individualistic motives to the behaviors of the people portrayed. Furthermore, other researchers have asserted that personalized news portrayals of social problems downplay the important structural (e.g., historical, societal, institutional,

economic, and political) processes that influence people's behavior (Bennett, 1996; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994).

The media's influence on people's attributions are particularly salient with regard to the issue of race (see, e.g., Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010; Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Domke, 2001; Gorham, 2006; Iyengar, 1990). For example, Ramasubramanian (2011) studied the effects of watching minority group media characters (in this case, African Americans, as opposed to majority group whites) behave in either negative stereotypical ways (e.g., linking African Americans to a high amount of criminal behavior or laziness, such as Flavavflav from the television show *The Flavor of Love* or Omarosa from *The Apprentice* television show) or in positive counterstereotypical ways (e.g., Oprah Winfrey or President David Palmer on the television show *24*). Ramasubramanian found that even brief exposure to these minority characters altered viewers' beliefs and attributions, such that when viewers watched African Americans behaving in negative, stereotypical ways, they "reported greater stereotypical beliefs . . . [and] more internal [casual] attributions [for their behaviors] . . . as compared to when they saw counter-stereotypical, positive African American media characters" (p. 509). Viewers also extrapolated these beliefs and attributions to represent the entire minority group; in this case, to all African Americans. The media's ability to influence people's attributions for causes of behavior as related to race might extend to other minority groups (e.g., people living in poverty, as is explored below).

As these examples demonstrate, the media can significantly affect people's attributions of causes of, and solutions to, social problems, potentially including poverty. Moreover, as explained in Chapter 2, news media portrayals of poverty not only lead to biased perceptions of how people living in poverty (or people who are homeless) behave (e.g., their tendency to

behave violently) but those portrayals also offer suggestions for why those groups deserve their marginalized positions, typically foregrounding individual causes that invoke deficit theory explanations (see, e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Sotirovic, 2003). Sotirovic (2003) eloquently summarized this impact:

As a consequence of the media's focus on the most heinous crimes and most aberrant welfare cases, criminals and poor people may appear to the audience members much more different from an average person, which may contribute to individualistic explanations of social problems. By inadvertently fueling individualistic explanations of social problems, media may also indirectly provide support for conservative social policies that are directed toward changing individuals rather than the social system.

Reporters can influence how their audiences think even while maintaining neutrality and taking no explicit positions on important issues. A long-term consequence of learning about complex problems from personalized and contextually poor media presentations may be reflected in a cultural trend toward more individualism at the expense of social responsibility. (p. 133)

Some researchers (e.g., Feagin, 1975; Feather, 1974; Norcia, Castellani, & Rissotto, 2010; K. B. Smith & Stone, 1989) have classified the types of attributions that people make about poverty, which tend to be variations of or adaptations to earlier internal–external attributional models. Like most research on attribution processes, this literature typically categorizes people's attributions about the causes of poverty as either:

internal (e.g. lack of thrift and proper money management by poor people, lack of effort by the poor themselves) and external causal attributions . . . [where the category of external attributions] is often further divided into structuralistic (e.g. low wages in some

businesses and industries, being taken advantage of by rich people), fatalistic (e.g. sickness and physical handicaps, just bad luck), and cultural causal attributions (e.g. the poor do not accept rules). (Loix & Pepermans, 2009, p. 385)

Other studies of attributions that people make about poverty have documented how different groups make different types of attributions about people living in poverty, such as people from different countries (European Commission, 2007; Furnham, 1982) or of different races or ethnicities (Hunt, 1996, 2004), professions (Robinson, 2011; Weiss-Gal, Benyamini, Ginzburg, Savaya, & Peled, 2009), ages (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001), political and ideological affiliations (Bobbio, Canova, & Manganelli, 2010; Weiner, Osborne, & Rudolph, 2011; Zucker & Weiner, 1993), and income levels (Bullock, 1999; Bullock & Limbert, 2003).

Attributions that people make about the causes of others' behaviors are not limited to their personal beliefs about those individuals but also can have social, moral, and legal consequences. Research has linked people's explanatory judgments to a wide variety of consequences, such as their views on public policies, social institutions, and particular groups of people (e.g., African Americans or people living in poverty) and their behaviors. Regarding the impact of attributions on social and governmental policies, Sotirovic (2003) asserted that

if someone believes that an individual motivation or character is the primary cause for committing a crime or being poor and receiving welfare benefits, then any social or governmental program directed at changing social conditions leading to those problems may be deemed wasteful and unjustified. (p. 123)

As another example, viewers in Ramasubramanian's (2011) study who watched African-American media characters behaving in negative, stereotypical ways, in contrast to exposure to positive, counterstereotypical ways, reported more hostile feelings toward African Americans, in

general, and they demonstrated decreased support for policy initiatives for minority group causes (e.g., affirmative action policies).

The research on attribution theory reviewed above demonstrates the importance of programs such as Circles, which facilitate interactions between people living in poverty and those who do not, with those programs potentially serving as opportunities for people to shift their attributions regarding the causes of poverty. The attribution literature also explains why many of Circles' Allies described having negative perceptions of people living in poverty and believing in individualistic, rather than structural, explanations of poverty prior to their Circles experiences (e.g., because of their exposure to media portrayals of poverty), even though they had experienced very few actual interactions with people living in poverty.

Moreover, understanding where people's attributions come from and how they shift is particularly important for those who are not impoverished and have chosen to work with people living in poverty, because, as S. C. Miller (2008), Payne (1996), and Payne et al. (2006) asserted, people who do not live in poverty rarely interact with those who do. Analogously, in the current study, all of the volunteer Allies, except for one—a social worker—said that Circles represented the first time that they had worked with people living in poverty. As such, Circles has powerful potential to influence Allies' perceptions of people living in poverty simply by facilitating these uncommon interactions. The next section further explores attribution theory in relation to Circles, focusing on links between the growth of interactional capital and subsequent shifts in people's attributions.

**Attribution theory, interactional capital, and Longmont Circles.** Because this research project did not expressly study the attributional behavior of Longmont Circles' participants, the exact nature of the impact of interactional capital on participants' attributions is

unclear. However, it seemed that through the process of building interactional capital, participants shifted their attributions of the causes of poverty from primarily blaming individuals to primarily blaming structural issues. Thus, building interactional capital (e.g., through the processes of developing shared knowledge of how to build social capital, coconstructing understandings of others, and accumulating types of communication that can build social capital and community) may be an important way for participants to change their perceptions of poverty and of the people living in it.

Before taking part in Circles, Allies described the causes of poverty as related to the particular deficiencies or traits (e.g., personality) of people living in poverty. This tendency to emphasize individual causes and to disregard situational factors is consistent with research on the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). In fact, many U.S. Americans hold these perceptions of people living in poverty; as Rank (2004) explained, “Americans tend to rank individual reasons (such as laziness, lack of effort, and low ability) as the most important factors related to poverty, while structural reasons such as unemployment and discrimination are typically viewed as less important” (p. 50). For example, Bobo and Smith (1994) estimated that 91% of U.S. Americans believe that poverty is caused by the lack of effort by those who are poor. As another example, a survey conducted by National Public Radio, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government found that “poor people lacking motivation” was thought to be a “major” cause of poverty by 52% of respondents, and a “minor” cause of poverty by 32%, as compared to only 9% of respondents who thought that lack of motivation was “not a cause” (National Public Radio, 2011, para. 8). The survey results also showed that the majority of respondents believed that drug abuse, single parents, and a decline in moral values were all important causes of poverty. Furthermore, the majority of respondents

replied that job shortages, a flawed welfare system, and poor school quality were *not* major causes of poverty (in fact, 78% asserted that there are jobs available for welfare recipients who really want to work). The survey also showed that wealthier U.S. Americans rarely ascribe their financial success to structural advantages, with 86% of the respondents who rated their financial situation as good or excellent attributing their success to “my own efforts and abilities,” with only 12% attributing their success to “things other people have done for me” or “good luck” (9% and 3%, respectively; para. 5).

These attitudes toward poverty are pervasive, even within people who have the most direct access to those living in poverty. For example, Reingold and Liu (2009) found that 43% of social service agency personnel (including those who work in nonprofits) believed that “cultural transmission or learned lifestyles” is the primary cause of poverty, and another 23% attributed poverty to the “attitudes and motivation” (p. 307) of those who are poor.

As documented in Chapter 4, Allies described that their understanding of what causes poverty and what keeps people living in it shifted from a focus on individual failings to broader, external systemic issues. Additionally, both Allies and Leaders exhibited attributional shifts about other group members’ behavior that can be linked to their collective engagement in CCPs, increasing knowledge of poverty, and increasing interactional capital (including the three processes involved in developing interactional capital of developing shared knowledge of how to build social capital, coconstructing shared understandings of other group members, and accruing types of communication that facilitate social capital). Participants noted the impact of engaging in CCPs and building interactional capital (even more so than accruing knowledge of poverty) for their shifting attributions (although they did not use that terminology to describe those changes). For example, an Ally highlighted the interactional capital processes (i.e., accruing

types of communication that facilitate social capital and coconstructing understandings of others) that shifted her attributions:

At my job, where I've been working for 17 years, I work all the time with people who are barely getting by. I never really considered why they were struggling, I just focused on helping them . . . but [in Circles], I've had all these opportunities to work one-on-one with Leaders, whether it's having deep conversations or sharing a meal, and we've become friends, and I've actually started asking why people get down and stay down. I've learned that the government programs I thought were helping, which I'm a part of, actually aren't helpful at all. I see how hard it is to live in poverty, struggling to borrow a car just to drive to work and to pay out of pocket when you're kid gets sick, and how strong people [who live in poverty] are, and how it's not their fault. I should have asked long ago, but we needed to build up those friendships first, and . . . I needed to learn how to ask questions in a way that it wasn't like I was at work, managing their case. To really see how things actually are, I needed to ask as a friend.

As another example, another Ally described how her attributions of the causes of poverty shifted through the interactions and CCPs that she experienced in Longmont Circles, and (albeit using different wording) linked these shifts to developing interactional capital:

I thought before [Circles] that [people living in poverty] were [engaging in] self-destructive behaviors or something. I thought they were doing things that I wasn't doing, you know, goofing off on a job and getting fired, or not taking an interview seriously, or spending money carelessly or gambling, or wasting welfare checks on beer money, or . . . . I don't know, I just thought that they were doing things, like bad habits, that kept them in poverty. I even thought that [as an Ally,] I could help teach them better ways of

acting. But it was like a lightning bolt hit me one day at a [Circles community dinner meeting]. I started looking around, thinking they [Longmont Circles Leaders] eat the same things as me, they get excited about the same things as me, they read the same books as me. We had just played a game altogether, and I lost to [two leaders] because [laughs] they're smarter than me! And I realized, oh God, they're just like me, or [laughs again] better than me. They're not doing any of those things I thought they were; no, they're dealing with so much more [than me], and I realize now that I'm only different because I've been fortunate in my life that I've haven't had those situations.

A third Ally similarly explained that by learning about the [Longmont group members], building relationships together and really learning about their lives and personalities, I've learned that I've been privileged, and that my privileges have helped me get ahead in life in ways that [many] Leaders haven't.

Thus, developing interactional capital within the group seemed to shift participants' attributions of the causes of poverty, even despite being educated (e.g., during Circles training) in line with the deficit theory philosophy of Payne (1996; Payne et al., 2001). As such, at Longmont Circles, it seems that opportunities for cross-class individuals to interact, engage in CCPs, and build interactional capital are more influential in terms of shifting participants' attributions than are opportunities for them to learn about poverty or social class (e.g., Circles training), which tends to perpetuate attributional errors regarding causes of poverty.

Because of the apparent importance of interactional capital in relation to people's attributions in relation to poverty, future research should further examine connections between these concepts. Moreover, although there is a broad body of research on attribution theory in

relation to the development of romantic relationships and marriages (see, e.g., Flora & Segrin, 2001; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989; Grigg, Fletcher, & Fitness, 1989; Helms, Proulx, Klute, McHale, & Crouter, 2006; Thompson & Kelly, 1981), little research has explored attribution theory in relation to the development of group relationships and/or community. As such, future research should seek to better understand links among communication, group/community development, interactional capital, and attribution theory.

### **Effects of Interactional Capital at the Relational and Collective Level**

Second, building interactional capital through Longmont Circles has community-building effects on the collective group of participants, in that there is a link between communication that people engage in and collective community building. This perspective is consistent with a communication perspective on community building; for example, as Adelman and Frey (1997) asserted, communication is “the essential defining feature—the medium—of community” (p. 5). At Longmont Circles, Ally Connie highlighted some of these communicative processes of building interactional capital to develop community:

To build community, we started on an individual level by learning how to create individual friendships. The Allies learned how to better help their Circle Leaders understand their own obstacles and what they need and what is holding them back, and the Leaders learned how to better talk to their Allies and ask for what they needed. Then we worked more on the group level, engaging in dialogue and doing activities and games together, and learning how to be a big community together. It takes both of those levels, and, really, the effort of both groups [Leaders and Allies] to get to the community that we have here. It’s not just one-sided.

As such, an interactional capital perspective on community building may bring to light some of the communication features and processes that contribute to the development of community.

In particular, interactional capital represents a distinctly communicative approach to building and sustaining community that foregrounds the coconstruction of knowledge, identities, and types of communication (e.g., particular CCPs) that can develop interpersonal relationships between and among participants. Because one of the primary intentions of building interactional capital is to develop high-quality interpersonal relationships and community among interactants (e.g., dyadic partners or group members), researchers should further explore the community that results from the process of developing interactional capital.

With regard to the exploration of community in the field of communication, the findings from this study extend the concepts promoted in that scholarly literature by examining how CCPs engaged in at Longmont Circles build community among a diverse group of people as they work together to aid some of the group members to move themselves out of poverty. In Chapter 2, the concept of community was explained by foregrounding its communicative construction and by explicating two approaches to community building: the transmission model, which sees communication as a tool to use to improve an existing community or group; and the constitutive model, which views community as a phenomenon that emerges from communication. Furthermore, Chapter 4 described Longmont Circles participants' perceptions and descriptions of the emerging community and documented how community building at Longmont Circles was approached from both transmission and constitutive perspectives. Additionally, as explored earlier in this chapter, some participants spoke about the ways that building interactional capital contributed to their shared sense of community.

Occasionally, participants described building community and interactional capital through a transmission perspective, privileging the use of communication tools (e.g., CCPs) to accomplish specific purposes or goals (e.g., educating participants how to become better listeners) that built and sustained interpersonal relationships and group community. For example, Ally Rob spoke of the “skills” that he had learned from enacting certain CCPs, which, in line with the shared resources for collective growth aspect of an interactional capital perspective, as Rob explained, “built our knowledge pool and taught us how to be a community.” Other participants explicitly used the “tools” metaphor to describe how particular CCPs facilitated the development and enhancement of group community. For instance, as a Leader explained:

The [CCPs] teach us tools for things like being better listeners or [that] encourage us to share things with our group, [and] from that we get better and more supportive. We get stronger as a community of people working towards a common goal.

Additionally, program staff, in particular, seem to view community building as a process of transmission, framing CCPs as communication-based tools that Longmont Circles gives to program participants that improve community (e.g., highlighting the importance of teaching strategies that lead participants to become better listeners).

At other times, participants described building community and interactional capital through a constitutive perspective, where a shared sense of community was socially constructed and sustained in interaction, often emerging during the process of participants engaging in particular CCPs. For example, Ally Betsy attributed the emergence of community, in part, to communication, saying, “Really just by talking and being together and getting to know each other, we learned to trust and appreciate each other, and community grew out of that.” As another example, a Leader referenced the emergent nature of community when she said,

“Community just happened from the fact that we meet together every week, from eating together and spending social time, and from the fact that we come together as a community to work on big problems and exchange ideas.”

As yet another example, an Ally told a story about constitutively building community within her small circle and with her Leader, Delores:

I told Delores, “If you ever need a ride to, like, go see a doctor or something, just give me a call.” And one day she had to go to a doctor’s appointment, and she asked me if I could drive her there, and I said, “Sure.” I picked her up and another Ally, too, and I said, “Road trip!” (Laughs) So we three headed on down there. Well, we got lost, because it turned out that I plugged in a slightly different address [in my GPS], but, anyhow, it was just an adventure! We all laughed about it, and it just really built this strong little sense of community within us. We were feeling so adventurous that after [the appointment,] we stopped at a new Oriental restaurant that has a little conveyer belt and food just goes on by and you just pull it off the belt. Delores had never been to anything like that before, and so I asked her if she wanted to go and she was like, “Yeah, sure!” and she was very game, so we just went for it. We just had a blast. We were cracking jokes and trying all this new food, and we felt very at ease and comfortable, like we were family, like we’d known each other for years. It was one of those heartfelt journeys that I look forward to doing again.

These examples highlight the importance of ritualistic or performative CCPs that create an emergent shared reality (e.g., explaining the development of community in a circle over time through processes of sharing and listening to personal narratives of struggle). Thus, in contrast

to the transmission perspective, the constitutive perspective views community as a phenomenon that emerges through interaction.

Because the development of interactional capital leads, in some ways, to a collaborative, second-order model of change with regard to poverty, this study foregrounded communication and community building as a constitutive process. Nonetheless, both the transmission and constitutive perspectives are valid, important, and evident in how participants describe and make sense of the community created and sustained at Longmont Circles. In fact, some participants described building community at Longmont Circles through the lens of both communication perspectives. A Leader, for instance, said:

The way we've built community [at Longmont Circles] has been a process. We learn things that help us bond together and try them out, and we're coming together as a group a little more and a little more each week. The closer we get [to each other], the more we learn, so we're constantly learning new things and then putting what we learn into action by trying it out. I think we're even learning as a group what it really means to be a community from spending time together as a group, and so what we do [in terms of community building] is changed by that [knowledge] as well.

As this example highlights, both transmission features (e.g., learning and enacting community-building strategies) and constitutive features (e.g., developing an emergent, shared notion of what it "really means to be a community") are present in Longmont Circles' process of building community and are recognized as such by participants.

However, when both perspectives are used, dialectical tensions can emerge from interactants using different processes and perspectives to accomplish a collective goal.

Dialectical tensions result when two equally attractive, although seemingly contradictory, ideas

are held at the same time. Blending contradictory perspectives without acknowledging their dialectical relationship can cause confusion over how a communicative practice can be enacted simultaneously from both perspectives. Although this study did not examine dialectical tensions in the Circles organization per se, it is likely that these tensions (e.g., an Ally's equally important commitments to his or her individual and group identities, or his or her desires to maintain positivity in the face of poverty and, simultaneously, to be honest and open about the many negative aspects or hardships of living in poverty) were present, and, as such, could represent an important focus of future research on the Circles organization.

Exploring these tensions is important, but, as Underwood and Frey (2008), concluded, they often are underexplored in communication research, and particularly in research about marginalized populations: "Communication scholars also could devote more attention to the interplay between these two perspectives to articulate, dialectically, how communication practices simultaneously 'build communities' and are employed by 'built communities'" (pp. 26–27). Thus, future communication research on community building as an outcome of participants developing shared interactional capital should document and explore these potential tensions to better understand how they are, and might be better, managed through communication.

### **Effects of Interactional Capital at the Systemic Level**

Lastly, building interactional capital through Longmont Circles represents a social justice approach to the problem of poverty that has effects on people getting out of poverty. As explained in Chapter 4, the Circles program (e.g., the CCPs employed, the aggregation of the individual shifts in perceptions, and the community built through the program) has a real impact on aiding some Leaders in their efforts to move out of poverty. These effects include increased

income and assets, decreased debt, and better housing and health-care resources for some participants. Moreover, at the systemic level, international capital, in particular, has real impacts on aiding some Leaders to move out of poverty. Some participants attribute their success to not only their growing interpersonal relationships with other Circles' members (e.g., social capital), but also to the resources that they constitutively build that create and sustain those relationships (i.e., interactional capital). For example, Leader Mary credited "learning to see myself as good enough [and] having others see me as their equal . . . which is a sign of true friendship" to her "confidence" and "success" in starting and maintaining a small business. As another example, Leader Carla said:

I've gained some friends [through Circles], and I [also] learned how to be a friend [with] people who I used to think were so different from me. We've learned as a group how to really connect and that's helped me be open to opportunities that I wouldn't have been open to [before participating in Circles].

As explained in Chapter 4, these interpersonal relationships even encouraged Carla to complete her college degree. Similarly, Chapter 4 documented the story of a Leader who felt such severe anxiety about being judged or rejected by her "wealthy" coworkers that she frequently thought about quitting her job. By building interactional capital and community with her fellow group members, this Leader gained the confidence necessary to maintain her job, which, undoubtedly, had important and beneficial economic consequences for her. As yet another example, Leader Dawn attributed her success at getting a Habitat for Humanity house (explained in more detail in Chapter 4) to the relationship-building resources she developed with other Circles members:

We know now . . . what it takes to be a tight group. I know that it took all those friendships to get my [Habitat] house, because, Lord knows, I jumped through enough hurdles, and I know that I couldn't have done it on my own. I know now how to have these [middle-class] friends who don't treat me like I'm some charity case. We've learned how to talk to each other, we really talk to each other, and we understand each other. I've used these skills to deal with the issues I've had in getting the house, [both] in having this posse at my back [and] in knowing how to talk and act as part of that group.

Given that these Leaders attribute some of their social, emotional, and financial success to building interactional capital, research should explore more fully whether and how interactional capital lead to people living in poverty to develop self-sufficiency and to move out of poverty.

Interactional capital also has systemic effects by affecting the types of communication about which individuals are knowledgeable and able to engage in that will create cross-class community, and, as such, interactional capital has the power to help individuals cocreate more accurate representations of poverty and of people living in it, and to change potential negative patterns of interaction between people living in poverty and people who do not. Unfortunately, many normative patterns of interaction in U.S. society, including by some human services employees, do more to reinforce hegemonic class differences than to help people overcome them. As documented in this study, this tendency may be reinforced by the flawed attributions that individuals make about causes of poverty (e.g., attributing poverty to individual deficits rather than to structural barriers), and that tendency often is exacerbated by the portrayals of people living in poverty by news media or in literature on poverty that promotes a deficit theory approach (e.g., Payne's work). As such, in many ways, people living in poverty are a social group that, routinely, is misunderstood and, as a result, their communicative power is greatly

limited or devalued.

Given that communication patterns and interactions promoted by current U.S. society have the effect of disenfranchising people living in poverty, it is imperative to examine how people living in poverty can be (re)enfranchised. As W. H. Papa et al. (2005) asserted, “A person who is enfranchised in a community has the ability to participate in the processes through which decisions are made” (pp. 245–246). At Longmont Circles, interacting with cross-class others and working to build interactional capital and community is one way that this (re)enfranchisement is accomplished, but the processes involved in (re)enfranchising people living in poverty, and, in particular, as they are accomplished through building interactional capital and community, deserve further exploration. Hence, understanding relationships among interaction patterns, (re)production of injustice, and (re)enfranchisement should be of utmost importance to researchers and activists alike. For example, Artz (2001) foregrounded the necessity of understanding structural processes and interactions that perpetuate injustice experienced at the interpersonal level. Crabtree (1998) also suggested, indirectly, encouraging the development of interactional capital when she asserted that when groups having different life experiences connect with one another, it gives both groups of people “a unique vantage point from which to see others’ perspectives and experiences” (p. 186–187). These and other scholars (e.g., Artz & Murphy, 2000; Frey et al., 1996), speak to the need for second-order models of change that promote cross-class interactions and encourage both subordinate and dominant groups to work together to coconstruct new meanings, build high-quality interpersonal relationships, and change systemic practices that perpetuate the marginalization of subordinate groups.

In many ways, the development of interactional capital is closely related to the promotion

of social justice, for as W. H. Papa et al. (2005) explained, “Central to the promotion of social justice is linking together different groups of people, specifically those who have access to resources with those who are oppressed and suffering” (p. 244). As such, interactional capital can function as a way to “[challenge] the norms, practices, relations, and structures that underwrite inequality and injustice” (Frey et al., 1996, p. 110), and, thereby, can promote a second-order model of change that addresses structural issues and foregrounds mutually beneficial and constitutively built cross-class interpersonal relationships. Moreover, by working to analyze, deconstruct, and counter “grammars that oppress or underwrite relationships of domination” (Frey et al., 1996, p. 112), an interactional capital approach recognizes the importance of building relationships and resources that do not replicate hegemonic interactions or that force people to assimilate into majority norms. To build these relationships and resources, many scholars have spoken about the need for the constitutive development new forms of communication and communicative resources (e.g., interactional capital). For example, as W. H. Papa et al. (2005) asserted:

For social justice to be promoted, a particular type of communication needs to occur between the oppressed and those offering assistance the members [where] the members of each group should reflect together on the symbiotic relation that exists between “institutionally organized social inequality and institutionally organized social services mitigating inequality” (Artz, 2001, p. 241). (p. 244)

Future communication research should take on this challenge by studying links between interactional capital and social justice.

### **Additional Future Research on Interactional Capital**

A communication model based in interactional capital, in many ways, is a social justice-

oriented, constitutive approach to building high-quality interpersonal relationships and community that reflects the need for change from participants in dominant as well as in subordinate groups (e.g., both people living in poverty and people not living in poverty).

Interactional capital focuses on interactions *between* people; consequently, interactional capital does not represent a traditional deficit model (in the context of poverty, where people living in poverty are framed as having deficits that cause their impoverished status) but, instead, views deficits as residing in the inability of people to successfully interact with each other.

Furthermore, the concept is constitutive in that change arises from a new, emergent form of communication produced by interactants rather than from preexisting tools that people adapt current relationships. Interactional capital, thus, deserves to be further explored in the context of creating systemic change for people living in poverty, and with others who are marginalized and underresourced.

It also is important to note that these three levels of effects of interactional capital work together to facilitate change. Interactional capital in the three levels of identified effects represents a nonlinear process (occurring simultaneously) where individuals' attributional shifts facilitate cross-cultural community building that leads to the development of interactional capital and facilitates systemic change, which all have tangible effects on individuals moving out of poverty. In this sense, these levels may be both effects *and causes* of interactional capital, in the same sense that increased student motivation can be both a cause and effect of student learning. Some scholars have noted these connections (for instance, Putnam, 2000, spoke to interconnections between community and equality, asserting that they are "mutually reinforcing"; p. 359). As such, more research is needed on both the development and effects of interactional capital.

However, it is important to note that by using the term *capital* (discussed earlier in this chapter), the interactional capital concept retains some of the “baggage” of the economic metaphor of capital (e.g., the focus on value creation, resources, and gains and losses), even though the primary uses of interactional capital are for the noneconomic purposes of understanding the CCPs involved in building interpersonal relationships and community. Interactional capital, thus, represents a unique view on building relationships and community, in that it examines the communicative resources that can be created between people to accomplish those relational goals, and, as such, it is different from literature that focuses on less concrete qualities of community building, such as its symbolic construction (see, e.g., A. P. Cohen, 1985).

However, although using the concept of interactional capital makes sense in applications where capital is a primary facet of the problem being explored (as is the case of poverty), the potential applications of interactional capital to other concepts (i.e., situations where capital is not the problem) may be limited. For example, it could be problematic to study interactional capital and community at a residential facility for people with AIDS, where residents deal primarily with emotional (as opposed to primarily material) problems related to coping with death and illness. As such, in those contexts, interactional capital may need to be adapted (e.g., by replacing the capital term with another word) to disconnect it from an economic model.

In conclusion, the Circles model of attempting to build sustainable communities and aid people to move out of poverty, including the CCPs and revised Circles framework documented in Chapter 4, as well as the focus on interactional capital introduced in this chapter, represents an important exemplar for building cross-class relationships and community. Furthermore, whether used in conjunction with Circles or potentially applied to some other significant social issues (although, as explained above, the use of the capital concept may make these applications more

limited), interactional capital may represent a powerful resource whereby cross-class individuals can constitutively create and sustain high-quality interpersonal relationships that can have important material effects on systemic issues and on people's lives. As such, communication scholars should further explore the concept of interactional capital, particularly in relation to social problems that involve a material or economic (e.g., as opposed to only emotional or symbolic) reality.

### **Pragmatic Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study suggest a number of implications for programs that address poverty, in general, and for the Circles Campaign, in particular. These implications include calls for programs that address poverty to focus on both individual and collective effort for change, the potential power of communication approaches for overcoming deficit models of poverty, the potential benefit of Payne's framework of poverty, and a call for the Circles organization, in particular, to better understand its method. Each of these implications is discussed below.

#### **The Need for Programs that Address Poverty to Focus on Both Individual and Collective Effort for Change**

First, strategies for confronting the important problem of poverty need to focus on both individual effort toward personal change and collective effort toward systemic change. Although individual poverty can, and has, been overcome through individual effort (e.g., by securing financial capital) or through group effort (e.g., charity models), poverty is better overcome through models that employ both strategies. Additionally, the collective problem of poverty in the United States (and elsewhere) cannot be overcome solely by the individual efforts of people living in poverty. The Circles program represents one organization that uses these dual strategies—individual and collective efforts—and the particular branch of the Circles program

investigated in this study—the Longmont Circles group—serves as an exemplar of how the Circles model can have important, beneficial effects on participants, including aiding them in their efforts to move out of poverty.

Moreover, to further improve Circles' social and political impacts on local communities, and as a way to extend and publicize Circles' effects on participants, Circles expand its staff—ideally, at both national and local levels by hiring (a) a media and brand strategist to market its dual-strategy model and to conduct media campaigns that broadcast Circles' message on a broader scale, and (b) a political liaison to increase Circles' potential impacts on local and national legislature, promote public advocacy, and to encourage structural policy and legal reform. These two new positions could help Circles to be a larger force in solving issues of poverty and to realize more fully its aspirations of becoming a second-order model of change.

### **The Potential Power of Communication Approaches for Overcoming Deficit Models of Poverty**

Second, as explained earlier in this chapter, many factors (e.g., media framing) contribute to the persistence of individuals attributing blame for both falling into and staying in poverty to the individuals living in poverty rather than to external, systemic issues. This view of poverty represents a deficit approach by portraying people living in poverty as responsible for their plight and ignoring the many structural reasons that exacerbate poverty. Some programs that address poverty, including the Circles organization studied, actually perpetuate this deficit model by teaching participants the mindset of poverty ideology advanced by Payne (e.g., Payne, 1996; Payne et al., 2006).

The finding from this study show that a communicative approach that encourages and facilitates regular, structured interactions between people living in poverty and those that do not

have powerful potential to change participants' attributions. However, few poverty programs focus on changing the attributions for the causes of poverty by individuals who do not live in poverty. Furthermore, even fewer poverty programs provide opportunities for people living in poverty and those who do not to interact with each other (hence, providing opportunities for individuals to potentially shift their attributions, as Longmont Circles participants—both Allies and Leaders—did). For example, earlier phases of the Generating Opportunities model (i.e., pre-Circles) educated people about systemic issues that contribute to the problem of poverty, but they did not facilitate cross-class interaction.

The Circles program focuses on interaction by facilitating interactions between people who live in poverty and people who do not, and by creating opportunities for participants to engage in CCPs designed to build high-quality interpersonal relationships and community. It is through these interactions and CCPs that middle-class participants have opportunities to shift their attributions from blaming individuals for their problems to holding external/systemic factors to be responsible, and, in doing so, to realize that there are institutional barriers that systematically disadvantage those who are poor. When individuals' attribution shift to systemic/external factors, poverty becomes a collective, rather than individual, problem.

As such, programs that focus indirectly (or not at all) on communication do not create opportunities for long-term, egalitarian interaction with people living in poverty. Furthermore, programs that do not focus on building interactional capital fall short, because focusing solely on education is not enough to shift some people's deficit theory mentality. Moreover, although programs that provide financial capital or its substitutes (food stamps, housing subsidies, etc.) help people living in poverty to survive, they make little impact on those individuals' ability to move out of poverty and remain permanently self-sufficient. Moreover, programs that teach

participants about differences between classes but do not focus on building interactional capital may risk reinforcing negative, hierarchical patterns of interaction that highlight dissimilarities but do not offer ways to bridge those gaps.

### **The Potential Benefit of Payne's Framework of Poverty**

Third, Circles' use of Payne's framework of poverty (e.g., Payne, 1996; Payne et al., 2006), which, in many ways, represents a deficit model, also can provide opportunities for people to move beyond majority norms by encouraging the constitutive development of new ways of interacting that bridge class boundaries. As explained in Chapter 2, Payne's framework of poverty is highly controversial: at best, it is a beneficially simple yet incomplete framework; at worst, Payne's claims are false and damaging to people living in poverty and to understanding poverty (for categorical critiques of her claims, see Bommer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2008b). As explained previously, one of Payne's primary influences on the Circles program is that Circles views people as being in one of two categories—those who come from a background of generational poverty and those who do not—who, supposedly, have fundamentally different orientations to the world and ways of acting within it. According to Payne, the mindset or culture of people in one of those groups, the culture of poverty, a concept she borrowed from O. Lewis (1961), represents a powerful force—stronger, in many ways, than other cultural factors, such as gender, ethnicity, or geographic location—that socializes people from generational poverty to think, talk, and behave in ways that maintain their economically disadvantaged social position. Payne (1996) asserted that people from a culture of poverty can be characterized by their performance of “hidden rules of poverty,” or “unspoken cues and habits of a group” (p. 37), which distinguish them from the different hidden rules enacted by those living in middle or upper classes. Because, as Payne argued, U.S. society operates using middle-class rules, people

from a culture of poverty are not only economically disadvantaged but, by operating from their culture of poverty rules and failing to recognize that those rules are different from middle-class rules in important ways, they also are engaging in self-limiting behaviors that prevent them from being perceived as competent in “a middle class world” (Payne, 1996, p. 173).

In many ways, Circles embraces and teaches this philosophy to participants during training and during weekly meeting presentations. However, as the examples below demonstrate, rather than fostering a climate where middle-class Allies mentor impoverished Circle Leaders by pointing out their deficits and suggesting strategies for improvement, sometimes, the impact of Payne’s framework on Circles’ participants was that both Allies and Leaders recognized that people from different classes have different beliefs (e.g., values) or ways of doing things (e.g., communicating and solving problems), but that one set of beliefs or behaviors is not better than another set of beliefs or behaviors. Moreover, some of those Allies and Leaders became frustrated at some participants’ or staff members’ attempts to assimilate people living in poverty into adopting dominant beliefs and behaviors, and they asserted, instead, that egalitarian interpersonal relationships and community must be constitutively and collaboratively built by developing new or alternative ways of communicating that do not require submission to either poverty or middle-class hidden rules. Furthermore, rather than ascribing to Payne’s theory that behaviors and attitudes of economically disadvantaged individuals largely perpetuate their state of poverty, Circles participants—both Allies and Circle Leaders—overwhelmingly express outrage at the many structural barriers (social, political, and economic, to name a few) that prevent people from easily moving out of a state of poverty. As such, although the framework of poverty model that Circles employs for training and education purposes is flawed for many important reasons, when used in conjunction with a communication approach that facilitates

interactions between people living in poverty and those that do not, it can accomplish important things for Allies.

Sometimes, Allies described appropriating Payne's framework in ways that did not represent a deficit perspective. For example, Ally Pam's description of Payne et al.'s (2006) *Bridges Out of Poverty* book illustrates how she came away with a more nuanced understanding of the structural disadvantages to growing up in poverty and the structural advantages to growing up middle class:

I loved reading *Bridges out of Poverty*, and I recognize things in there from other people who I work with, and I was able to appreciate that there are some typical experiences and situations that are specific to growing up in poverty or growing up middle class. I see now how those things made it harder for poor people, and actually made it easier for me. That was really interesting and helpful for me [because] I've realized that it's not always about your work ethic or your attitude.

As another example, Ally Joan was able to see past stringent class divisions in Payne's framework, and expressed a desire to "erase boundaries" between classes:

While I feel like I understand how using [the *Bridges Out of Poverty* book's framework] as a model is helpful for showing how different life experiences make people act in different ways, sometimes it is overused. I feel like there are not clear boundaries and just because you grew up one way doesn't mean that everything about this perspective relates to you. And, yet, it often feels like that is the way that it's presented to me. So I'm going, "Yeah, but, it's not totally like that." It really offends me to think of someone as being either this category or this one, or this class and that class [because] it's not always about class. And as useful as it can be, I think it's detrimental because it's thrown

in [our] face[s] over and over again. It's turned as "this is a poverty consciousness habit," [which] does more to reinforce differences than create equality. Because of that, it feels like people have to make a choice to abandon their loyalty to what they grew up with and join this new [middle-class] group and lifestyle. I want to erase boundaries [between classes], not bolster them. So I take what is helpful and ignore the rest.

As these examples show, some Allies took away helpful aspects of Payne's framework and ignored parts that did not resonate with their approach to working with Circle Leaders as they moved out of poverty.

On other occasions, a positive outcome of using Payne's framework as part of the Circles model was that the framework showcases different forms of normal (e.g., ways of thinking and interacting that may be normal for people living in poverty, as compared to ways that may be normal for people not living in poverty), which can lead to the development of interactional capital. By learning about different normalized ways of behaving, and then engaging in cross-class interactions with group members, some Allies and Leaders realized that there were different ways of interacting that might be mutually beneficial to members of both classes rather than privileging one class's way of interacting over the other. Put another way by Ally Betsy, the framework taught some participants that "the way that we [Allies] usually go about doing things doesn't have to be the only way to act; [rather,] we can find a middle ground that all people can agree on." Leader Thomas further explained, "we learned that we [Allies and Leaders] do things differently, but that there's no right or wrong way to be, and it's not good for anyone to force them to adapt to someone else's way of being."

Another positive outcome is that some participants described using Payne's foundation to engage in some processes of creating interactional capital, both inside and outside of Circles.

For example, an Ally who is a family services worker described that when she tries to get her clients to use government resources, she builds off her knowledge of Payne to create new ways of communicating that privilege both relationships and success. For instance, she explained that when trying to get a family to call weatherization services to better insulate its trailer, she said, “Call Diane, she is a friend of mine, she will help you out, and you can get what you need done.” As she explained, “I take what I know from my perspective and now I take what I know about theirs, and I try to use them both.”

As another example of how Payne’s framework was appropriated to create interactional capital, Leader Mary expressed how her initial worries that her Allies would try to assimilate her to middle-class ideals dissipated as they met regularly in Circles’ meetings. In explaining what happened, instead, Mary foregrounded the need to create new ways of interacting that are beneficial to both people living in poverty and those who do not:

At training, we learned that a poverty mindset is one way, and a middle-class mindset is another way, and a rich mindset is even another way. So [early on,] I thought I was going to learn how to act middle class, that that’s what my Allies were going to teach me. I wasn’t sure what I thought about that, because [laughs] I didn’t want to turn into, like, a rich snob! But we didn’t do that. We talked about those mindsets but didn’t do one or the other; we sort of met in the middle instead. I listened to [my Allies] and they listened to me, and we found a common ground that was good for me and good for [my Allies,] too. I think we all learned [and] we all changed.

Thus, as these examples illustrate, Payne’s flawed framework did lead to constructive outcomes for some of Circles’ participants.

On yet other occasions, however, participants appropriated Payne's framework in ways that demonstrated a deficit orientation to poverty. For example, in some instances, Allies reverted to this deficit model and framed Circles practices as attempts to fix Leaders' deficits. For instance, in describing the purpose of New and Good, an Ally said, "There is so much negativity in Circle Leaders' lives, which keeps them in that mentality of poverty, so they need to concentrate and think purposefully about what's going on that is good in their lives." As another example, Ally Walter described the purpose of the Big View meetings, which are designed for Allies, Leaders, and other community members to come together to discuss structural barriers and structural solutions to getting out of poverty, as primarily "geared towards the Circle Leaders, so I don't find them that beneficial to me but it's not a problem to sit there, and, sometimes, I'll learn something I don't know about." Rather than viewing the type of interaction that would build community and aid people to move out of poverty as a two-way model of change, these Allies talked about change, and about some Circles practices encouraging change, as only necessary for Leaders.

Some scholars have offered explanations of why many people (e.g., some Circles participants, as well as the many educators, policy makers, government workers, and others) may agree with Payne's framework. For example, Gorski (2008b), a strong critic of Payne's work, likened Payne's framework to "the science pedagogy consultant pushing intelligent design [and] the history curriculum specialist still insisting that we are in Iraq to fight terrorism" (p. 144), and he asserted that Payne's framework resonates with some people because of Payne's legitimization of stereotypes that they already hold. Gorski (2008b) further explained that those who find that Payne's ideology rings true to their experience only "relate to the hidden rules because the rules paint them as moralistically and intellectually superior to people in poverty" (p.

144). As the above examples illustrate, some participants exhibited using hidden rules in this way.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Circles' training alone is not enough for some participants to overcome the deficit theory orientation of Payne's framework. For example, former Ally Cynthia (who participated in Circles training and joined the Longmont Circles group in early stages, but left before pairing with a Leader and other Allies to form a circle) described a conversation that occurred at her workplace:

At [work,] there are two women who I work with who are pretty poor. A few of us were standing around and these two women were talking about getting their GEDs and then trying to move out of their parents homes, because they both were still living with their mothers. One of the women said, "My family just doesn't understand why I want to get my own place. They think that's ridiculous, like, why do you want your own place?" and the other [woman] agreed. Without the [Circles] training that I had, I would have thought, "Well that doesn't make sense! They must be stupid!" but when I think about what I learned in training, and [Payne's] hidden rules, I realize the [importance of] relationships [for people living in poverty], and how people who are in poverty kind of hold the rest of the people [in poverty] back with them because they think they're supposed to stick together, they don't allow other people to move on, and that's why they stay in poverty. I guess I have to respect that that's their reality, that's just how it is for them [because] those are the hidden rules and the mental models, and that's just how they operate. There's nothing I can do about it but try to teach them that they need to change their values if they want to get ahead in life, but I don't know that they'd listen to me.

Cynthia, thus, assigned blame to these two women for being poor based on a teaching from Payne's framework: the idea that poor people value relationships over success. She also did not think the women would listen to her, and she probably did not consider these women to be her friends. As such, none of the particular group processes that are used in conjunction with teaching Payne's framework at Longmont Circles (e.g., use of some CCPs that build relationships, or a focus on interaction) were present, yet, in Cynthia's mind, and, thus, the culture of poverty framework that Cynthia learned remained a deficit approach to poverty. Perhaps if Cynthia had stayed in Circles and had built friendships and interactional capital with fellow group members, she would have thought differently about her role in aiding these two women in their efforts to move out of poverty.

Participants also struggled to find a balance between understanding, as an Ally explained, that "we two groups are equal," and enacting Payne's framework, which asserts that Circle Leaders and Allies are different, have different needs, and should not be, as described by another Ally, "lumped in with middle-class ways of thinking and doing things." To negotiate these separate, and sometimes competing, beliefs, many Circles' participants assert that a tenuous "different but equal" mantra exists within the group. To honor this "different but equal" mantra, most Circles Allies are careful not to impose middle-class ideologies (e.g., running meetings in a businesslike manner) on Circle Leaders, with the (flawed and heavily contested, at least by academics) understanding that these ideologies are not normative practices in the "culture of poverty" environment in which Circle Leaders from generational poverty likely grew up. Instead, participants sought out ways of interacting that were mutually beneficial to people from different class backgrounds.

Even when an understanding of the life world and needs of the “other” is not fully formed, the intention to honor those differences and to create new ways of interacting that do not try to assimilate others into dominant ways of being prevails. For example, Ally Kimberly described having intentions of communicating with fellow group members (including Leaders) in ways that do not privilege communication topics that potentially may exclude some members of the group:

Sometimes I worry about saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing, because I don't fully understand where the Circle Leaders are coming from. I have a better idea now than when I first started, but I still worry. For example, [when] catching up with people at the beginning of weekly meetings and talking with them about how their week has been, or during New and Good, that's a time when I'm particularly careful. I'll catch myself talking about a vacation or something that is not easily attainable for Leaders, and think, “Oh, that was a bad move.” I always want to be really supportive of their struggles and very understanding of where they're coming from, and I realize that I'm not always that careful [and that] I should be more careful. It's so easy to just revert to talking about the things I talk with my other friends about, [but] I want to change, [and] I think that [changing] would make me a better person.

Thus, by rejecting normative ways of interacting and not privileging dominant middle-class ideologies, Circles' participants seek to create new class-straddling practices and interactional patterns that are beneficial to both people who live in poverty and those who do not.

As this discussion reveals, it seems that Payne's framework, as used as part of the Circles training programs, functions as a catalyst for change. In this sense, it can be likened to Hartnett's (1998) descriptions of teaching in a prison and having the students reenact the 1858 Lincoln–Douglas slavery debate as a framework for immersing prisoner-students in political engagement

and activism. Both Circles and Hartnett used provocative and even controversial methods (e.g., educating people about Payne's "mindset of poverty" and having prisoners reenact that slavery debate, respectively) to stimulate dialogue and critical thinking about important social issues (e.g., poverty and prison reform, respectively) that potentially can lead to new ways of thinking and interacting.

Hartnett's (1998) project paid off with powerful results on participating prisoner-students. Specifically, Hartnett explained that engaging in the debate fueled the realization among the prisoner-students

that ideologies are not inexplicable instances of "false consciousness" or mass stupidity, but rather, the necessary conceptual apparatus and explanatory narratives that give shape and meaning to real-life practices . . . [which] suggests that ideologies are subject to transformation, and that life is less reified and deterministic than a cynical perspective might suggest, and, therefore, more open to informed intervention. (p. 239)

By teaching prisoner-students basic debate skills and constructing a public forum for their voices to be heard, Hartnett created and the students utilized a "heuristic social space" (Hartnett, 1998, p. 234), in which interactions occurred that otherwise would not have happened. In doing so, Hartnett documented that the students

were encouraged to realize that they, like their historical predecessors, possess political agency, and that the world of democratic politics—although structured heavily by (among others) racist, sexist, and classist agendas—is nonetheless remarkably open, even *to prisoners*, for critical interventions by organized and articulate activists. (p. 239)

Similarly, through the interactions facilitated by Circles' CCPs and the resulting interactional capital developed between and among participants, Allies and Leaders alike felt that they had

gained agency, in the sense that the power to change dominant discourses of class interaction was in their hands, even if only in that small Longmont Circles group.

### **A Call for the Circles Organization to Better Understand its Method**

Finally, at present, the Circles organization does not have a full understanding of how its program functions or how it achieves its particular results. Circles focuses on social capital and community, but does not understand the importance of interactional capital (or even that the program builds interactional capital, if only inadvertently). Thus, Circles represents an opportunity to build both social and interactional capital through connections with others, with the hope that financial capital also will develop as a result. It is important for the Circles organization and for those who participate in it to understand this method and how it differs from traditional antipoverty approaches to effectively facilitate the development of interactional capital between and among participants.

Moreover, although Circles' participants understand that the program is different from many other programs that aid people living in poverty (e.g., government programs or charity models), they often do not understand how building social capital leads to building financial capital, and they continue to frame "progress" as taking steps toward acquiring financial capital (rather than relationship building, etc.). For example, when answering the question, "What would it take for your Leader to move out of poverty?" Allies often explained that getting a job was the primary necessary step. By answering the question in that way, they likely are unable to be as successful as they might be at building interactional capital, compared to having a clearer understanding of the particular processes and CCPs involved in building interactional capital. Additionally, the way that Circles has been characterized in and by the media does not reflect an interactional capital perspective of shared resources. As an example, a recent article by Aguilar

(2011) in the Boulder (Colorado) daily newspaper noted that the director of Circles' sponsoring agency, Boulder County Community Services, said that "most of all, it takes grassroots initiatives like the Circles Campaign to plug people who feel alienated from society back into society and give them a sense of purpose" (para. 17).

Understandably, negotiating these different views of progress can be difficult. At times, Circles walks a fine line between privileging the material reality of poverty (e.g., the need for Leaders to have jobs that pay a living wage, which may privilege middle-class norms) and the appreciation of multiple ways of living in the world. Given that the program uses deficit theories, at times, Circles falls on the wrong side of that line. At other times, participants developed innovative ways of solving material problems and, simultaneously, appreciated different ways of living. However, the Circles program did demonstrate concrete, positive results in terms of aiding Leaders in their efforts to move out of poverty, and, for at least four Leaders at Longmont Circles, aided them in improving their material reality in significant ways (e.g., increasing their assets and income, decreasing debt, and improving housing). Hence, participants' and staff members' underdeveloped and, at times, conflicting understandings of poverty (e.g., material vs. symbolic realities, or the need for individual vs. systemic change), how social capital can be built (e.g., through interactional capital), and how building social capital (e.g., through interactional capital) leads to building financial capital does not seem to negatively affect the program. Moreover, as this chapter documented, participants often described engaging in and sharing ways of communicating that foregrounded an interactional capital perspective. Regardless, it is important for Circles to understand processes and practices that it employs, and their effects on participants, and the Circles organization (perhaps with the help of scholars, through future research on Circles) could do more to facilitate such understandings.

The Circles organization also does not have a clear picture of how its program represents a communication model, or how the communicative practices and activities Allies and Leaders engage in build community among participants. For example, Circles' documents primarily conceptualize communication (communication, in general, as opposed to communicative practices, in particular) as a linear process of transmitting information or maintaining contact with others, as opposed to focusing on the constitutive importance of communication for building and maintaining community and cross-class interpersonal relationships. For instance, "communication" often is identified in documents produced by Circles as a message-transferring tool, and is used synonymously with "e-mail" or "talk." This linear conceptualization is evidenced in the section of the manual about recruiting Allies, entitled "Communication":

Good follow-up after a contact is especially important to keep the urgency alive and to answer any questions the individual or group may have. Personal contact by phone and a written thank you note for attending the presentation are positive and potent in setting the stage. It also models the values of Circles in respecting and valuing everyone's individual gifts and talents and respecting their limitations and choices. Follow up contact that is consistent, respectful, and appreciative will help people commit—life is busy and we all need reminders of what is important. (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 118)

This view of communication also dominates the various team-building exercises with communication-improving functions that are employed by Circles, such as the "Paper-Tearing Exercise" (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 168), which introduces the need for two-way communication between participants by highlighting problems inherent to following complicated and vague instructions (of folding and making holes in a piece of paper), without asking questions about how those instructions should be implemented, specifically; and the "Face

Game,” a charades-like icebreaker where participants take turns silently acting out various emotions that teammates try to correctly identify, which highlights “body language and non-verbal communications” (p. 170). This understanding of communication as an educational tool of informational exchange (a transmission model) rather than as a process of communal meaning-making goes against the goal of Circles to aid people living in poverty to empower themselves to move out of poverty, and that understanding undermines the relationship-oriented approach that the organization seeks to employ.

In conceptualizing *communication*, in general, as a linear process of information transference, Circles emphasizes the use of particular CCPs as tools to build community, but these CCPs, and the purposes for implementing them, are framed from different, and competing, perspectives. Sometimes, the purpose of using these practices is framed from the perspective of a constitutive process of building community; for example, S. C. Miller et al. (2010) explained that the purpose of asking and answering the suggested self-disclosure questions (listed in Chapter 2) is to “allow people to explore their own experiences of vulnerability and lack of privilege in order to connect with people in poverty who experience that every day” (p. 69). However, in other explanations, building community is approached from a transmission perspective, such as educating Allies on the Rescuer Triangle, which is designed to make Allies and Circle Leaders “be aware of [their] tendencies to take unproductive actions in relationships” (S. C. Miller et al., 2010, p. 143), or when explaining the purpose of New and Good as a practice that “develops communication, trust and a peer environment across lines” (p. 67).<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, these perspectives are mixed in ways that do not clearly differentiate between constitutive and transmission modes of communication. For instance, S. C. Miller et al. (2010) described CCPs as communication “tools” (language typically ascribed to the

transmission perspective) that are designed to “create rituals” (language typically ascribed to the constitutive perspective) when they said: “The five tools listed above [New and Good, setting group ground rules, listening pairs, appreciations, and a mentality of focusing on dreams rather than barriers] create rituals within Circles meetings and events that promote relationship building, reciprocity, focus on dreams, and flatten status differences” (p. 151).

As explained earlier in this chapter, blending transmission and constitutive perspectives of communication creates dialectical tensions and complexities. Moreover, although Circles—both locally and nationally—does not necessarily recognize these practices as CCPs, communication, at least, is identified as an important skill to develop and a desired outcome of these activities. However, given that Circles seems to blend constitutive and transmission perspectives without understanding the dialectical tensions inherent to enacting two seemingly contradictory ideas at once, coupled with the organization also seemingly privileging a linear view of communication (and, as a result, a transmission perspective on community building as a top-down information exchange), there is a clear need for the organization to better understand the constitutive nature of these CCPs for creating and sustaining an emergent community, and the dialectical tensions that arise from doing so in conjunction with a transmission view of communication. As such, future research, perhaps, could explore possible tensions that result from using both of these perspectives on communication and community building, and document strategies that Circles’ staff and participants use to manage these tensions.

### **Limitations and Additional Directions for Future Research**

Although the findings from this study suggest some important conceptual and practical implications, those findings need to be interpreted in light of some limitations that characterized this research. As discussed below, these limitations include potential biases due to the limited

scope of data collected, studying only one of the three Boulder County Circles Campaign sites, use of questionnaire data, a lack of concrete measures through which to assess Leader's movement out of poverty, and the particular language used to describe the interactional capital concept promoted in this study.

First, the scope of the data collected demonstrated important limitations. Attending weekly community dinner meetings, training sessions, inner-circle meetings, and other events provided ethnographic insights into how the Circles program was practiced and communicated, and how participants built interpersonal relationships with each other over time, but I was not present for every meeting and, consequently, may have missed important episodes of talk that would have revealed additional and alternative perspectives about the program, the implementation or framing of program practices, and the effects of those practices on participants. Additionally, my ability to fully capture the effects of Circles' practices on participants was not feasible, given that many of the effects documented were experienced by participants in their personal interactions with friends or family members, or were perceived by them (rather than physically exhibited). This research, therefore, relied on participants' talk about those effects (which, as previously explained, was assumed to be accurate) and on my ability as a researcher to interpret how participants were affected by Circles through my limited observations, interviews, and, to a lesser extent, questionnaire data (explained in more detail below). Although it may be impossible to track all of the program effects, especially those perceived and enacted psychologically, future research could do more to understand these impacts by interviewing participants' friends, family members, and coworkers; collecting and analyzing participants' blogs and journals; and including more open-ended questions on the questionnaire to track participants' experienced changes. Additionally, future research

employing longitudinal data collection methods (e.g., tracking effects of the Circles program 5, 10, and/or 20 years after people's participation) would likely provide the broader scope that the data collected in this research study lacked.

A second limitation of the study concerns the program chosen for observation, in terms of its small sample size due to being split across three locations that maintain separate and autonomous programs, meetings, and participants. I initially intended to study all three sites of the Boulder County Circles Campaign; not only the Longmont site but also the Lafayette and Boulder sites. However, due to logistical issues (including lack of early Ally interest, low fund-raising returns, high Ally turnover, staff turnover, and scheduling problems), the second (Lafayette) and third (Boulder) sites did not start until much later than program staff originally had anticipated or desired. Furthermore, the Longmont site studied moved on a slower schedule than originally was anticipated. For example, typically, Allies and Circle Leaders formally pair up to form circles at the third meeting, but because there were not enough Allies to fulfill the required two per Circle Leader (the rule is no one-on-one pairings), this pairing did not occur until much later, and it then occurred by creating "double circles" of two Leaders paired together as a group with two to four Allies. These logistical considerations made it necessary to focus this research study on the one Longmont site. Obviously, broader studies of multiple sites would have yielded even richer data and potentially revealed a wider variety of effects of the Circles program on participants. This study of the practices and effects of the Circles program, and especially of the interactional capital that participants develop, thus, merely represents the beginning of such research.

A third limitation is the limited use of the questionnaire data collected. As mentioned in Chapter 3, because the questionnaire was completed by such a small number of participants, I

exercised caution and did not rely on those data to explain the program's effects on Longmont Circles group members (and the particular CCPs in which participants engaged); rather, the questionnaire primarily was used as a secondary form of analysis to support data obtained through interview and observational ethnographic methods. In future research, I could return to these questionnaires, conducting quantitative analysis of the data, to further understand the impact of Circles on participants.

Fourth, this research is limited by a lack of concrete measures through which to assess Leaders' movement out of poverty. I drew from the six "primary results sought by Circles": household income, assets (particularly savings), debt, credit, health insurance for everyone in the home, and enough food and affordable housing (S. C. Miller et al., 2010). However, I relied on Leaders' self-reports of the progress that they had made toward these results rather than on external indicators (e.g., tax returns) or others' accounts (e.g., other household members), which resulted in a self-reported analysis of progress (e.g., comparing self-reported measures prior to starting Circles and after approximately 12 to 16 months of participating in Circles). Even so, Leaders' self-reports offered detailed descriptions of indicators (e.g., their assets, debt, and food) that were beneficial to understanding the impact of Circles on their progress toward self-sustainability. However, future research on the impact of poverty programs on participants should include concrete behavioral before-and-after measures of participants' progress out of poverty.

A final limitation stems from the particular language used to describe the interactional capital concept promoted in this study. For example, as mentioned previously in this chapter, for some scholars, the interactional capital concept may retain the detrimental "baggage" of the economic metaphor of capital (e.g., the focus on value creation, resources, and gains and losses),

even though the primary use of interactional capital in this study is for the noneconomic purpose of understanding the CCPs involved in building interpersonal relationships and community. As a result, the potential applications of interactional capital to other situations—unlike poverty—where capital is not the problem, such as in support groups for people dealing with loss or illness, may be limited, and in those contexts, the use of the term “capital” may need to be adapted or replaced to disconnect it from an economic model.

As another instance of the limitations or potential problems of language usage demonstrated in this study, other scholars may see the relationship between interactional capital and interactional competence differently than what was discussed in this chapter. Hymes (see, e.g., 1972, 1992), for instance, probably would view interactional capital a particular, macrolevel form of interactional competence. Hymes is credited with expanding the concept of “interactional competence” by moving beyond distinctions of competence and performance, and he asserted that it is impossible to study communication competencies apart from their actual enactment as performance. As such, Hymes’s view of communication competence is not constrained by the link to communication *skills*, to which some scholars have objected, including Fairclough (1999), whose critiques were documented earlier in this chapter. Hence, future research needs to further articulate the relationship between interactional capital and competence.

### **Conclusion**

This study documented the collective communicative practices engaged in by Longmont Circles participants, to understand more deeply how they are used and, to a limited degree, with what effects on participants. The findings from this study provide insight into the communicative practices of an understudied organization and program that attempts to aid people in their efforts to move out of poverty by building new cross-class relationships and

social and material resources. By doing so, the study draws attention to an understudied topic of research in the communication discipline—poverty. The findings led to proposing the new concept of interactional capital, which represents the often-overlooked resources produced between and among individuals to constitutively create and sustain high-quality interpersonal relationships and community, which, hopefully, will prove useful to communication scholars. In accomplishing these goals, this study offers important insights to engaged communication scholars who seek to bring their communication resources to bear to confront significant challenges faced in the world and, simultaneously, to advance the conceptual and practical value of the communication discipline.

In closing, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the fulfillment that I have derived from this project, both as a scholar and as a human being. My life has been so positively enriched by the moments that I shared with those involved with the Longmont Circles program. I deeply value the opportunities to share meals, moments, and conversations; learn more about the difficulty and stigma of poverty; celebrate others' accomplishments large and small; challenge myself to participate in artistic and creative endeavors that I had not tried previously; watch high-quality interpersonal relationships between very diverse individuals flourish; and grow personally and professionally as a result. I am honored to have peered into the windows of others' lives, and I recognize how special it was to have those views, and that this happened only because individuals were willing to let me watch and listen to their very intimate, vulnerable, and often difficult interactions as they struggled through the process of moving out of poverty.

In particular, I was most affected by the interviews that I conducted with Circle leaders and Allies, which led to learning more about the trials and triumphs involved in the complicated processes of becoming increasingly empowered and self-sufficient, and working alongside those

trying to do so. The time that I shared with Leaders and Allies during those interviews—over lunches at local diners, in church meeting rooms, and, most often, in people’s homes—listening, laughing, lamenting, and learning, have made me a more compassionate, empathetic, understanding, and appreciative person. I am greatly indebted to, and truly thankful for, the individuals who shared their lives with me.

I also am thrilled to have had the opportunity to spend a significant portion of my academic career working on an issue that is so deeply important and fulfilling to write about. In the words of Novak and Harter (2008), working with people living in poverty has reminded me “of the importance of making academic theory answerable to life, to the consequentiality of severe poverty and the resiliency of the human spirit” (p. 412).

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>These additional anonymity measures (i.e., representing participants’ names with only “Leader A” or “Ally B”) were used to further protect participants’ identities.

<sup>2</sup>In yet other instances, the use of some CCPs seems to function as a secularized version of therapy, which, on some occasions, was approached from the perspective of a constitutive model (e.g., focusing on ritualistic notions of bonding together as a group and creating and recreating collective definitions of community) and, on other occasions, was approached as a transmission-based tool (e.g., during the use of specific conversational styles, such as open disclosure, or through the CCP of maintaining positivity). In these instances, Allies most often reaped the benefits of this type of “therapy” (e.g., personal growth). For example, when describing how her participation in Circles had affected her personal relationships, an Ally asserted that “Circles is kind of like therapy,” and she described how she was able to “learn and grow” by observing the challenges of successes of other group members and learning from their progress. Aside from this example, because the observations and interviews conducted for this study did not focus on or address the prevalence of therapy in Circles, the extent to which these type of therapeutic discourses pervade Circles’ ideology and practice is not clear. Hence, future research could further explore these concepts to better understand how a therapy model might be integral—or perhaps damaging—to Circles participants’ experiences and subsequent effects.

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## APPENDIX A

## TIMELINE OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE RELATED TO U.S. POVERTY

(Adapted in part from information in:  
Albeda, Folbre, and The Center for Popular Economics, 1996; Furj, n.d.)

- 1647: First Colonial Poor Law enacted by Rhode Island emphasizes public responsibility for “the poor” and “the impotent”
- 1692: Establishment of the Province of Massachusetts Bay Acts, which establishes indenture contracting of poor children
- 1773: Establishment of the first public mental hospital, located in Williamsburg, Virginia
- 1790: Establishment of the first public orphanage, located in Charleston, South Carolina
- 1824: Establishment of the first state-funded institution for juvenile delinquents, the House of Refuge, located in New York
- Before 1862: Public assistance for people living in poverty is enacted locally. At this point in time, the poor, including orphans, were often confined to workhouses.
- 1862: Federal government distributes pensions to Union army Civil War veterans who are injured, and/or their dependent survivors
- 1890: Federal government extends pensions to all Union army Civil War veterans (not just those who are injured) and their dependents
- 1897: New York State legislature considers, but ultimately rejects, the Destitute Mothers Bill (at the time, approximately 10% of poor children lived with a single mother)
- 1909: White House Conference on Children largely ends the existing practice of removing children from their homes (to be placed in orphanages and other institutions) because of their parents’ poverty
- 1911: States begin to establish the first mothers’ aid programs
- 1915: States begin to establish the first old-age pension program
- 1921: Federal government establishes the Sheppard-Towner Act, which provides funding for maternal and child health programs and, as such, was considered the first federally-funded social welfare program in the U.S.. In the next few years, the programs created by the Act helped to significantly reduce the infant mortality rate.

- 1929: Federal government repeals the Sheppard-Towner Act due to heavy lobbying by the American Medical Association, which argued that government-sponsored healthcare would interfere with doctor's recommendations. This was particularly unfortunate due to the stock market crash that same year, which brought on the beginning of the Great Depression and pushed many into sudden poverty
- 1933: Federal government passes the Emergency Relief Act, which improved existing relief efforts by providing some work for employable people on those relief lists by creating new unskilled jobs (e.g., construction, production of consumer goods) and professional projects (e.g., for writers, artists, and musicians), and diversified existing relief programs (e.g., by including women)
- 1935: Federal government passes the Social Security Act, which establishes insurance and assistance for seniors, unemployment insurance for some workers (not including agricultural and domestic laborers), and Aid for Dependent Children living in fatherless families
- 1937: Housing Act established federal low-rent public housing programs where the rent charged could not exceed 30% of a renter's income
- 1939: Social Security provides survivors' benefits directly to widows and children
- 1945-1949: Federal GI bill established, which provides World War II veterans with benefits for life, including funding for home mortgages, health care, and education
- 1946: Establishment of the School Lunch and Breakfast programs, which offered free or reduced-cost meals to low-income students in public and private nonprofit schools and poor adults and children in day-care programs. Establishment of the National Mental Health Act, allocating funding for psychiatric education and research and leading to the creation of the National Institute of Mental Health.
- 1952-1956: Expansion of coverage in both Social Security Act and Aid for Dependent Children program, which, as a result, is renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The new AFDC program offers cash assistance primarily to single mothers, but contains a variety of unconstitutional restrictions on individual behavior. For example, the AFDC's "man-in-the-house" rule denied otherwise qualified children welfare benefits if their mother was living with, or having relations with, any single or married able-bodied male, citing that the man was considered a substitute father.
- Early 1960s: Unconstitutional AFDC restrictions are successfully contested during political activism associated with the welfare rights movement
- 1964: President Johnson officially declares war on poverty. Federal government creates Food Stamps program and establishes the Equal Opportunity Act, which funds job training programs and other organizations (e.g., Upward Bound, Job Corps, Community Action programs, and Volunteers in Service to America).

- 1965: Establishment of the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (later becomes the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Establishment of the Medicare program, which provides medical insurance for the elderly. Establishment of the Medicaid program, which provides assistance for people who are elderly, disabled, or extremely impoverished. Establishment of Head Start program, which provides education related to school, health, and nutrition for low-income families.
- 1967: Establishment of the Work Incentive (WIN) program due to legislators' fears that AFDC aid was discouraging mothers from seeking and maintaining work. WIN allowed working welfare recipients to keep some of their job earnings and mandated job training programs for unemployed mothers if child care was available; however, the program was lacked sufficient funding and child care options
- 1969: President Nixon asserts the existing welfare system has failed and proposes instead the Family Assistance Plan to replace AFDC, a federal welfare system that offers aid in the form of an a guaranteed minimum income for all families (which was far below the existing poverty line). The plan is later withdrawn and voted down in Congress.
- 1971: Establishment of the Pell Grant program, funded by the federal government, which provides educational support for students from low-income families who are working on their first bachelor's degree at an accredited institution
- 1972: Establishment of the Social Security Amendment, which institutes the federally-funded Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program that guarantees income to people who are disabled and to low-income seniors.
- 1973: Establishment of The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), designed to promote job training and emphasize work. Reflects the general ideology of the 1980s that the poor lacked motivation and skills to work (rather than opportunity or funding)
- 1974: Establishment of the Women, Infants, and Children Food and Nutrition Information Program (WIC), designed to provide poor women and children with food vouchers and nutrition counseling. Establishment of the Legal Services Corporation, which provided legal services to poor people in civil (not criminal) matters (e.g., family law, consumer fraud, job benefits)
- 1975: Establishment of the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program, designed to increase collection rates on child support payments collected
- 1980: President Reagan makes significant cuts to welfare spending
- 1981: Establishment of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act, which decreases availability of public-service jobs and cuts benefits low-income workers. The Act also establishes Low-Income Energy Assistance programs, which provide funds for heating, cooling, weather-related, and emergency needs to low-income families.

- 1988: Establishment of the Family Support Act, which creates the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program (JOBS), a welfare-to-work program that replaced WIN. JOBS was designed to provide AFDC recipients with opportunities for education, training, and jobs as a means of avoiding long-term welfare dependency; however, few states provide full funding for the program
- 1990: New AFDC requirement for states to provide funding for families with two unemployed parents, but stringent restrictions limited many families' eligibility. Many states begin to impose new restrictions for AFDC families (e.g., "Learnfare," which penalizes families with children not regularly attending school, and family caps, which provide no additional aid for children born to families that are already on assistance). President Bush signs the Americans with Disabilities Act, a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination based on disability. Establishment of the federally-funded Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act, which provided funding for low-income and un/under-insured people with AIDS and their families.
- 1996: President Clinton passes the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which fundamentally shifted the method and goal of the federal cash assistance program for the poor and "ended welfare as we know it." PRWORA restructured existing welfare programs (e.g., ending welfare as an entitlement program) and shifted the federal welfare responsibility in favor of increased state autonomy.
- 1997: Establishment of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (as a part of PRWORA), supplanting both the AFDC and the JOBS programs. TANF placed time limits on welfare assistance (e.g., a maximum of 60 months of benefits in a lifetime), imposed stricter conditions for Food Stamps programs, and reduced immigrant assistance.
- 2009: Establishment of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (referred to as the Stimulus), designed to immediately save and create jobs (e.g., in infrastructure investment and energy research) through tax incentives and by reversing many of the Clinton-era welfare-to-work provisions. The act also provided temporary relief programs for those most affected by the recession.
- 2011: Florida Governor Rick Scott signs the Welfare Drug-Screen Measure, mandating drug screening for welfare applicants; the measure is later revoked by a Federal Judge

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

*A. Introductory Information*

- To maintain participant confidentiality, no actual names or identifying information of any participants, including you, will be used at any point in the study. Would you like to choose a pseudonym for yourself? If not, I can choose one for you.
- What is your role in Circles? (Ally? Circle Leader? Staff?) **\*\*NOTE: Make sure not to record any names or identifying information\*\***
- Why did you first join Circles?
- What makes you continue to participate in Circles?
- Do you enjoy participating in Circles?
- What is your favorite part?
- What is your least favorite part?

*B. Purpose of Circles*

- What do you think the is main purpose of Circles?
- How does Circles accomplish that purpose?

*C. Circles' Practices*

- How is Circles different from other programs that you participate in? **\*\*NOTE: Make sure not to record any identifying information about these other programs or any information that could identify a particular participant\*\***
- What is most noticeably different about Circles?

The Circles program explains 5 steps to building a Circles community. I am going to go through each of those steps and get your perceptions on how it is enacted at Circles.

The first step is defining a common vision.

- Do you think that Circles has a common vision?
  - If NO, prompt that Circles tries to instill “a common vision of ending poverty for everyone to work toward”
- If so, what does that common vision look like?
- How does Circles get people to share a common vision?
- Are there people in Circles who do not share that vision? **\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\***
- Has that common vision or the practices Circles uses to establish that vision had any effect on:
  - Building community within the group? If so, how?
  - Helping you (OR other Circle Leaders) move out of poverty? If so, how?

The second step is defining a common language.

- Do you think that Circles has a common language? (A special way of talking?)
  - If NO, prompt that Circles tries to instill “a common language *to discuss similarities and differences*”
- If so, what does that common language (special way of talking) look/sound like?
- How does Circles get people to share a common language?
- Was it hard for you to understand this language when you first started at Circles?
- Are there people in Circles who do not share that language? **\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\***
- What sort of vocabulary words does Circles use that are unique to this program?
- Go through each word participant lists and ask for the definition.
- Do you think that it is beneficial to refer to people in poverty as “Circle Leaders”?
- Has this common language or the practices Circles uses to establish a common language had any effect on:
  - Building community within the group? If so, how?
  - Helping you (OR other Circle Leaders) move out of poverty? If so, how?

A third step is defining a set of shared values.

- Do you think that Circles has shared values?
  - If NO, prompt that Circles tries to instill “values and principles *to guide the healthy development of the community*”
- If so, what are those values?
- How does Circles get people to share values?
- Are there people in Circles who do not share those values? **\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\***
- Have these shared values or the practices Circles uses to establish shared values had any effect on:
  - Building community within the group? If so, how?
  - Helping you (OR other Circle Leaders) move out of poverty? If so, how?

A fourth step is “establishing an atmosphere of permission to use common sense, so that people feel free to do whatever is most appropriate to solve particular problems and reach defined goals.”

- Do you think that Circles fosters this type of atmosphere of permission to use common sense?
- If so, what does this look like in practice? (For example, can you give me an example of how this is used at a community dinner?)
- How does Circles establish this atmosphere?
- Are there people in Circles who do not believe in this type of atmosphere? **\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\***
- Has this atmosphere of permission to use common sense, or the practices Circles uses to establish this atmosphere, had any effect on:
  - Building community within the group? If so, how?

- Helping you (OR other Circle Leaders) move out of poverty? If so, how?

The final step is to hold community dinners.

- What is the purpose of Circles community dinners?
- What are the community dinners *intended* to accomplish?
- What do they *actually* accomplish?
- Do you enjoy participating in these dinners?
- What is your favorite part of community dinners?
- What is your least favorite part?
- Have these community dinners had any effect on:
  - Building community within the group? If so, how?
  - Helping you (OR other Circle Leaders) move out of poverty? If so, how?

Circles also uses training to teach Circle Leaders and Allies about the Circles process.

- What is the purpose of Circles training?
- What is the training *intended* to accomplish?
- What does it *actually* accomplish?
- What did you learn at training?
- What did training *not* help you with that you wish it had?
- Did you enjoy participating in training?
- What was your favorite part of training?
- What was your least favorite part of training??
- Has this training had any effect on:
  - Building community within the group? If so, how?
  - Helping you (OR other Circle Leaders) move out of poverty? If so, how?

#### D. *Effects of Circles*

(On Participants' Beliefs...)

- Has Circles changed your beliefs about people living in poverty?
- If so, how (has Circles changed your beliefs about people living in poverty)?
- Has Circles affected your beliefs about other things?
- If so, how (has Circles affected your beliefs about other things)?
- Why do you think you have changed?
- What, in particular, led to that change in belief?
- Tell me about a time when you really noticed something that you believed different that changed because of your involvement with Circles.

(On Participants' Attitudes...)

- Has participating in Circles affected your attitudes?
- If so, how (has Circles affected your attitudes)?
- What, in particular, do you think about differently since joining Circles?
- Why do you think you have changed?
- What, in particular, led to that difference in attitude?

- Tell me about a time when you really noticed something different in your attitude that changed because of your involvement with Circles.

(On Participants' Behaviors...)

- Has Circles affected your behaviors?
- If so, how (has Circles affected your behaviors)?
- What, in particular, do you do differently since joining Circles?
- Why do you think you have changed?
- What, in particular, led to that difference in behavior?
- Tell me about a time when you behaved differently because of your involvement with Circles.

(On Participants' Goals...)

- What are your goals as a Circle Leader/Ally?
- How long have you been working on each goal?
- How have you progressed toward those goals since joining Circles?
- What, in particular, do you think has contributed to your progress on that goal?
- Has your participation in Circles helped you make progress on that goal?
- Has participating in Circles changed your goals?

(On Participants' Relationships...)

- Has Circles affected your relationships?
- If so, how (has Circles affected your relationships)?
- Why do you think you have changed?
- What, in particular, led to that difference in your relationships?
- Tell me about a particular relationship that has changed.

(On Helping Participants Move out of Poverty...)

- Has Circles helped you move out of poverty, or has it helped you make any steps toward moving out of poverty?
- If so, how (has Circles helped you make steps to moving out of poverty)?
- Why do you think you have changed?
- What, in particular, led to that change?
- Tell me about a particular thing you have changed

#### *E. Intentional Togetherness with Diverse People*

- How do you think that the Circle Leaders/Allies are most different from you?
- Have any of these perceived differences changed over time? (e.g., in the beginning vs. now)
- Tell me about a time when you really noticed a difference between yourself and a Circle Leader/Ally. **\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\***
- How do you think that the Circle Leaders/Allies are most similar to you?

- Have any of these perceived similarities changed over time? (e.g., in the beginning vs. now)
- Tell me about a time when you really noticed a similarity between yourself and a Circle Leader/Ally. *\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\**
- Describe what those first few Circles gatherings were like for you. *\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\**
- What was most comfortable about working with Circle Leaders/Allies?
- What was most uncomfortable or awkward about working with Circle Leaders/Allies?
- What, if anything, helped you overcome that discomfort or awkwardness?
- Currently, what issues arise when working with your Circle? *\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\**

#### F. Circles and Community Building

- When you think about a community, what images come to mind?
- Do you think that this specific Circles group is a community?
- (If so) tell me about a time when the group really felt like a community.
- Can you talk me through a timeline of how community developed in the group?
- What do you think really made this group a community?
- For what reasons would you label this group a community? Are there any reasons that you felt were obstacles or challenges to the group forming a community?
- Did it seem like everyone in the group shared this sense of community? *\*\*NOTE: Remind interviewee not to use specific names here or any information that could identify a particular participant.\*\**
- Did the group talk about the idea of community, either directly or indirectly?
- What does being a community mean to you?
- Do you think that Circles builds community in its participants?
- What factors helped to really “build” this community?
- Tell me about a time where you really felt like the group was building community.

#### G. Success of Circles

- Do you think Circles is working?
- What is working best about it?
- What do you attribute that success to?
- What is working the least with Circles?
- What do you attribute those challenges to?
- If you ran the Circles program, what changes would you want to implement?

*H. Closing Questions*

- Any other impacts of Circles on your life that you feel I've missed or that you want to talk further about?
- Anything else you'd like to talk about?

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT SURVEY

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CIRCLES PARTICIPANTS  
(Allies)

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please fill out as much of it as you can. PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential. I appreciate your help!

**A. Time with Circles (Circle one)**

Less than 3 months                      3–5 months                      6 months–1 year                      More than 1 year

**B. Changes in Behaviors and Thoughts (Circle 2 answers for each question)**

HOW GOOD OR BAD WERE YOU ON THE FOLLOWING SKILLS BEFORE BEING PART OF CIRCLES?						HOW GOOD AND BAD ARE YOUR SKILLS NOW?					IF THERE WAS ANY CHANGE, DO YOU THINK IT WAS CAUSED BY BEING PART OF CIRCLES?	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	1. Listening skills	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	2. Public speaking skills	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	3. Asking for help from others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	4. Communicating with people who <b>are</b> living in poverty	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	5. Communicating with people <b>not</b> living in poverty	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	6. Staying positive through difficult times	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	7. Being warm when communicating with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	8. Being supportive of others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	9. Searching for jobs	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	10. Socializing with diverse people	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	11. Sharing my things with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES	

BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	12. Being empathetic when communicating with others (thinking about how the other person feels)	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	13. Sharing my time with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	14. Believing in myself	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	15. Speaking with others about big community issues (politics, current events, etc.)	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	16. Speaking with others about personal issues (personal struggles and strengths)	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	17. My knowledge of poverty	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	18. My ability to set and work toward goals	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	19. My ability to help others set and work toward their goals	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	20. My social network of other people willing to help me	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	21. My willingness to share my successes with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	22. My willingness to share my fears or failures with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	23. My ability to give emotional support	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	24. My ability to help others build their self-esteem	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES

BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	25. Believing I will succeed	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	26. Understanding that everybody has worries and insecurities	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	27. Talking to others about money	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES

28. Were the changes above **caused by** any specific activities or events you did at Circles?

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**C. Relationships**

1. How many other Circles participants are you close with?

- Everyone else in the group
- Most people in the group
- About half of the people in the group
- Only a few people in the group
- Only other Allies
- Only Circle Leaders
- No one in the group

- YES! Yes ? No NO!      2. I find it socially demanding to meet regularly with many people.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      3. I get depressed talking about poverty all the time during meetings.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      4. I get uncomfortable sharing personal information about myself.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      5. I enjoy having the company of others here.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      6. I enjoy the opportunity to talk to others about what is going on in my life.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      7. Circles meetings are often the only time I socialize with other non-family members in a typical week.

**D. Perceptions of Others and of Circles**

1. On the whole, how would you describe your relationship with ALLIES?  
(As professionals? As friends? As bosses? As caregivers? As family members? Other?)

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2. On the whole, how would you describe your relationship with CIRCLE LEADERS?  
(As professionals? As friends? As bosses? As caregivers? As family members? Other?)

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3. On the whole, how would you describe with THE CIRCLES PROGRAM?  
(As a family? A therapy group? A community? A government program?)

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**E. Practices at Circles (Circle Answer)**

DO YOU FIND THE FOLLOWING THINGS AT CIRCLES HELPFUL?

- YES! Yes ? No NO!      1. Eating dinner together
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      2. Reciprocity list
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      3. Announcements (during weekly meetings)
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      4. Sharing table
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      5. Monthly meetings with your small circle
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      6. Weekly Monday night meetings at the Church with the whole group
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      7. Big View meetings
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      8. New and Good
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      9. Creative goal sharing during Monday meetings (making collages of future goals and plans, drawing/coloring future goals, etc.)
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      10. Other crafts during Monday meetings (making chocolate mice, etc.)
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      11. Sitting in a circle
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      12. Listening pair activities
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      13. Using the terms “ally” and “circle leader”
- 14. Any other things that you find **helpful** or **unhelpful**?

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**F. Community Climate (Circle Answer)**

- YES! Yes ? No NO!      1. Participants put a lot of energy into what they do around here.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      2. Circles is a lively place.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      3. Participants are proud of Circles
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      4. There is very little group spirit at Circles.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      5. Participants seldom help each other.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      6. Participants go out of their way to help other Circles participants
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      7. Participants tend to hide their feelings from one another.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      8. Participants say anything they want to each other.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      9. This group has built a strong community.

**G. Beliefs about poverty (Circle Answer)**

DID YOU BELIEVE THE FOLLOWING BEFORE COMING TO CIRCLES?

DO YOU BELIEVE THESE NOW?

IF THERE WAS ANY CHANGE, DO YOU THINK IT WAS CAUSED BY BEING PART OF CIRCLES?

**People stay in poverty because...**

- |                   |   |                   |     |
|-------------------|---|-------------------|-----|
| YES! Yes ? No NO! | 1. They aren't as smart or hardworking as people who do not live in poverty               | YES! Yes ? No NO! | YES |
| YES! Yes ? No NO! | 2. They make poor choices   | YES! Yes ? No NO! | YES |
| YES! Yes ? No NO! | 3. They lack resources from the government  | YES! Yes ? No NO! | YES |
| YES! Yes ? No NO! | 4. Society is flawed in its ability to help those in need                                 | YES! Yes ? No NO! | YES |
| YES! Yes ? No NO! | 5. The "cliff effect" makes it too difficult for them to get off of government assistance | YES! Yes ? No NO! | YES |

Any other **before** reasons? \_\_\_\_\_

Any other **after** reasons? \_\_\_\_\_

**In general, most people living in poverty are...**

YES! Yes ? No NO!	6. Friendly	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	7. Hard to approach	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	8. Smart	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	9. Lazy	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	10. Hardworking	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	11. Snobby	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	12. Have to deal with a lot of problems	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	13. Too busy to spend time with me	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	14. Probably not going to like me	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES

Any other **before** qualities? \_\_\_\_\_

Any other **after** qualities? \_\_\_\_\_

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!!

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CIRCLES PARTICIPANTS  
(Circle Leaders)**

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please fill out as much of it as you can. PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ANYWHERE. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential. I appreciate your help!

**A. Time with Circles, *not including Getting Ahead* (Circle one)**

Less than 3 months                      3–5 months                      6 months–1 year                      More than 1 year

**B. Changes in Behaviors and Thoughts (Circle 2 answers for each question)**

HOW GOOD OR BAD WERE YOU ON THE FOLLOWING SKILLS BEFORE BEING PART OF CIRCLES?						HOW GOOD AND BAD ARE YOUR SKILLS NOW?					IF THERE WAS ANY CHANGE, DO YOU THINK IT WAS CAUSED BY BEING PART OF CIRCLES?
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BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	10. Socializing with diverse people	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	11. Sharing my things with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES

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BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	12. Being empathetic when communicating with others (thinking about how the other person feels)	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	13. Sharing my time with others	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	14. Believing in myself	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
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BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	25. Believing I will succeed	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	26. Understanding that everybody has worries and insecurities	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES
BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	27. Talking to others about money	BAD!	Bad	Fair	Good	GOOD!	YES

28. Were the changes above **caused by** any specific activities or events you did at Circles?

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**C. Relationships**

1. How many other Circles participants are you close with?

- Everyone else in the group
- Most people in the group
- About half of the people in the group
- Only a few people in the group
- Only Allies
- Only other Circle Leaders
- No one in the group

- YES! Yes ? No NO!      2. I find it socially demanding to meet regularly with many people.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      3. I get depressed talking about poverty all the time during meetings.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      4. I get uncomfortable sharing personal information about myself.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      5. I enjoy having the company of others here.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      6. I enjoy the opportunity to talk to others about what is going on in my life.
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      7. Circles meetings are often the only time I socialize with other non-family members in a typical week.

**D. Perceptions of Others and of Circles**

1. On the whole, how would you describe your relationship with ALLIES?  
 (As professionals? As friends? As bosses? As caregivers? As family members? Other?)

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2. On the whole, how would you describe your relationship with CIRCLE LEADERS?  
(As professionals? As friends? As bosses? As caregivers? As family members? Other?)

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3. On the whole, how would you describe with THE CIRCLES PROGRAM?  
(As a family? A therapy group? A community? A government program?)

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**E. Practices at Circles (Circle Answer)**

DO YOU FIND THE FOLLOWING THINGS AT CIRCLES HELPFUL?

- YES! Yes ? No NO!      1. Eating dinner together
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      2. Reciprocity list
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      3. Announcements (during weekly meetings)
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      4. Sharing table
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- YES! Yes ? No NO!      8. New and Good
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      9. Creative goal sharing during Monday meetings (making collages of future goals and plans, drawing/coloring future goals, etc.)
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      10. Other crafts during Monday meetings (making chocolate mice, etc.)
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      11. Sitting in a circle
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      12. Listening pair activities
- YES! Yes ? No NO!      13. Using the terms “ally” and “circle leader”
- 14. Any other things that you find **helpful** or **unhelpful**?

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**In general, most middle class people are...**

YES! Yes ? No NO!	10. Friendly	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	11. Hard to approach	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	12. Smart	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	13. Lazy	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	14. Hardworking	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	15. Snobby	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	16. Have to deal with a lot of problems	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	17. Too busy to spend time with me	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES
YES! Yes ? No NO!	18. Probably not going to like me	YES! Yes ? No NO!	YES

Any other **before** qualities? \_\_\_\_\_

Any other **after** qualities? \_\_\_\_\_

**G. Community Climate (Circle Answer)**

- YES! Yes ? No NO! 1. Participants put a lot of energy into what they do around here.
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 2. Circles is a lively place.
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 3. Participants are proud of Circles
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 4. There is very little group spirit at Circles.
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 5. Participants seldom help each other.
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 6. Participants go out of their way to help other Circles participants
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 7. Participants tend to hide their feelings from one another.
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 8. Participants say anything they want to each other.
- YES! Yes ? No NO! 9. This group has built a strong community.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME!!

## APPENDIX D

## PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Meanings and Effects of Collective Communicative Practices  
at the Boulder County Circles Campaign**

Principal Investigator Angie White  
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Please read the following material that explains this research study. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you want to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits—if any—are associated with the study. This should help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Angie White, a graduate student in the University of Colorado at Boulder's Department of Communication, 270 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-270. This project is being done under the direction of Professor Dr. Lawrence R. Frey, Department of Communication, 270 UCB. Angie White can be reached anytime by email at [whiteab@colorado.edu](mailto:whiteab@colorado.edu) or by phone at (804) 837-2828. Professor Frey can be reached at (303) 872-6655.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

This research study is about Circles' practices (such as "new-and-good" or weekly dinners). The purpose of this study is to understand the meanings those practices have for Circles participants, and the various effects of those practices on Circles participants. You are being asked to participate in this study because you currently are involved in Circles as either an ally, Circle Leader, or staff member, and all Circles Allies, Circle Leaders, and staff are being asked to participate. It is entirely your choice whether to participate in this study, and your choice to participate, in no way, will affect your Circles experience. Approximately 62 participants will be invited to participate in this research study.

**PROCEDURES**

Taking part in this study is completely **voluntary**. You do not have to participate if you don't want to. You may also leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### Description of Procedures

This research project involves four types of data collection: (A) participant observation of Circles weekly meetings, (B) interviews with Circles participants and staff, (C) reviewing already collected data (such as the Circle Leader surveys completed in October 2010), and (D) surveys about the effects of your participation with Circles. Each type of data collection is explained below.

#### A. Participant Observation

If you agree to take part in the participant-observation portion of this research, you will simply take part in your group during the Circles weekly meetings as you normally would. During these meetings, the PI will observe the group and record notes on Circles practices and their effects on participating individuals.

#### B. Interview

You may also be asked to participate in an interview with the PI about your experience of Circles. During these interviews, participants will be asked questions about: (1) their role in Circles, (2) why they joined Circles, (3) the goals of Circles, (4) the success of Circles, (5) the practices of Circles, (6) the meanings of those practices, and (7) the extent to which and in what ways participants feel those practices have impacted their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, goals, relationships, and sense of community. Sample questions include: “How is Circles different from other programs that you participate in?”, “Has Circles changed your beliefs about people living in poverty?”, “What is working best about Circles?”, and “What, if anything, do you do differently since joining Circles?”

#### C. Review of Pre-Collected Data

You may also be asked if you would like to grant permission for the PI to review data that you have submitted to Circles, or that Circles has collected on you (such as your Ally volunteer request form or the Circle Leader survey collected in September). If you agree to grant the PI access to your data, the PI will review your responses for research purposes regarding this study only.

#### D. Surveys

You may also be asked to participate in a survey about the effects of your participation with Circles. In these surveys, participants will be asked questions about: (1) demographics, (2) changes in your thoughts and behaviors because of participation in Circles, (3) your perceptions of others, (4) Circles practices, (5) your relationships with others at Circles, (6) the community climate at Circles, and (7) your beliefs about poverty and about people living in poverty. Sample questions include: “How strong were your listening skills before Circles? How are they now?”, “How would you describe Allies?”, “Do you find New and Good to be helpful?”, and “Do you think that Circles is a lively place?”

### Time Commitment to Complete Research Procedures

General participation in this study (participant-observation) should require no additional time or effort on the part of participants, as the researcher will simply be observing and taking notes on their Circles experience. If participants choose to engage in an interview, it is

estimated to take a maximum of 2.5 hours. Additionally, filling out a survey is estimated to take approximately 30 minutes.

#### Research Location

Observation and surveys will take place at the Circles weekly meeting location at First United Methodist Church (350 11<sup>th</sup> Ave, Longmont, CO 80501). Additional interviews will take place either at that same location (350 11<sup>th</sup> Ave, Longmont, CO 80501) or at nearby locations convenient to participants in order to minimize participant travel.

#### Audio and/or Video Recordings

Participation in the interview portion of this research may include audio recording. These digital audio recordings will be used for research purposes only and will be transcribed within one week of their recording and erased promptly after. Those individuals who will have access to these digital recordings will be the PI, Angie White, and her university faculty advisor, Dr. Lawrence R. Frey. Being audio recorded is not a requirement for interview participation. You may still participate in the study should you choose not to be recorded.

### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this study.

You will not be asked about any illegal activities, but if you should discuss such activities, the information could be requested by authorities such as the police or court system. Additionally, there are some things that you might tell us that we CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:

- Child abuse or neglect.
- A crime you or others plan to commit.
- Harm that may come to you or others.

### **BENEFITS**

You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, your participation in this study may help us learn more about the practices and effects of Circles and may help improve future Circles programs.

### **SUBJECT PAYMENT**

You will not be paid for participation in this study.

### **ENDING YOUR PARTICIPATION**

You have the right to withdraw your consent or stop participating at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) or refuse to participate in any procedure for any reason. Refusing to participate in this study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

<b>CONFIDENTIALITY</b>
------------------------

We will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. No actual names or identifying information will be used at any point in the study (this covers all data including surveys, field notes, and interviews, as well as the final paper and any other public displays of this information). During interviews, participants will be reminded on multiple occasions not to use specific names (including their own) or any information that could identify a particular participant. Surveys do not ask for any names, and remind participants not to put their name anywhere on the survey. De-identified data will be used only for the purposes of this research, and will not be retained for research purposes not yet known.

All digital audio recordings will be transcribed within one week of their recording and erased promptly after, and all data and transcripts will be stored digitally on the PI's personal computer in password-protected files. All hard copy data will be securely stored in the PI's locked desk. Other than the researcher, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the University of Colorado at Boulder Institutional Review Board may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

<b>QUESTIONS?</b>
-------------------

If you have any questions regarding your participation in this research, you should ask the investigator before signing this form. If you should have questions or concerns during or after your participation, please contact Angie White at (804) 837-2828.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, Rm A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.

<b>AUTHORIZATION</b>
----------------------

I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can withdraw at any time. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing five pages.

Name of Participant (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_.

**(Also initial all pages of the consent form.)**

I am consenting to be observed during Circles meetings.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to be observed during Circles meetings.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I would not like to be observed during Circles meetings.

I am consenting to be interviewed.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to be interviewed about my Circles' experience for this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I would not like to be interviewed about my Circles' experience for this research.

I am consenting to be audio taped during the interview portion of this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to be taped during my interview for this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I would not like to be taped during my interview for this research.

I am consenting that my pre-collected Circles' data be reviewed for this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I allow my pre-collected Circles' data to be reviewed for this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not allow my pre-collected Circles' data to be reviewed for this research.

I am consenting to participate in a survey.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to participate in a survey about the effects my Circles' participation for this research.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I would not like to participate in a survey about the effects my Circles' participation for this research.

## APPENDIX E

## UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO IRB INITIAL LETTER OF APPROVAL



University of Colorado at Boulder  
Institutional Review Board  
563 UCB  
Boulder, CO 80309  
Phone: 303.735.3702  
Fax: 303.735.5185  
FWA: 00003492

27-Jan-2011

**Initial Approval - Expedited**

White, Angela

**Protocol #:** 10-0364

**Title:** Meanings and Effects of Communal Communicative Practices at the Boulder County Circles Campaign to End Poverty

Dear Miss White,

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this protocol in accordance with Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46. You must use the IRB approved informed consent form when obtaining consent from subjects participating in this protocol. The IRB approved consent form is available in the attachments folder of your protocol in eRA.

**Initial Approval Date:** 27-Jan-2011

**Expiration Date:** 26-Jan-2012

**Documents Approved:** Recruitment Materials; Letter of Agreement from Circles CAP; Appendix A - Interview Guide; Protocol; Consent Form; Consent Form; Protocol; Response to Modifications Required; Initial Application - eForm v2;

**Number of subjects approved:**62

**Review Cycle:** 12 months

**Expedited Category:** 7

**Regulations require that this protocol be renewed prior to the above expiration date. The IRB will provide a reminder prior to the expiration date, but it is your responsibility to ensure that the continuing review form is received in sufficient time to be reviewed prior to the expiration date.**

Changes to your protocol must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to their implementation. This includes changes to the consent form, principal investigator, protocol, etc.

All events that meet reporting criteria must be submitted within 10 business days from notification of the event. Any study-related death must be reported immediately (within 24 hours) upon learning of the death.

The IRB has approved this protocol in accordance with federal regulations, university policies and ethical standards for the protection of human subjects. In accordance with federal regulation at 45 CFR 46.112, research that has been approved by the IRB may be subject to further appropriate review and approval or disapproval by officials of the institution. The investigator is responsible for knowing and complying with all applicable research regulations and policies including, but not limited to, Environmental Health and Safety, Scientific Advisory and Review Committee, Clinical and Translational Research Center, and Wardenburg Health Center and Pharmacy policies. Approval by the IRB does not imply approval by any other entity.

Please contact the IRB office at 303-735-3702 if you have any questions about this letter or about IRB procedures.

Kathleen Church  
QA/Database Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board

## APPENDIX F

## UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO IRB AMENDMENT LETTER OF APPROVAL



University of Colorado  
Boulder

Institutional Review Board  
563 UCB  
Boulder, CO 80309  
Phone: 303.735.3702  
Fax: 303.735.5185  
FWA: 00003492

08-Nov-2011

**Amendment Approval - Expedited**

White, Angela

**Protocol #:** 10-0364

**Title:** Meanings and Effects of Communal Communicative Practices at the Boulder County Circles Campaign to End Poverty

Dear Miss White,

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved the amendment described below in accordance with Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46. You must use the IRB approved informed consent form when obtaining consent from subjects participating in this protocol.

**Approval Date:** 08-Nov-2011

**Expiration Date:** 26-Jan-2012

**Number of Subjects:** 62

**Associated Documents:** \* Appendix E Survey; Project Description; Appendix B Updated consent form; Revised Protocol Document (8Nov11); Appendix D Additional Recruitment Materials; 10-0364 Appd B Consent Forms (8Nov11); 10-0364 Appd D Recruiting Material (8Nov11); Revised Protocol Document; Amendment - eForm;

**Description of Amendment:** I am adding a survey (Appendix E) that asks participants about the effects of their participation with Circles that I will have all consenting participants complete. In these surveys, participants will be asked questions about: (1) demographics, (2) changes in their thoughts and behaviors because of participation in Circles, (3) their perceptions of others, (4) Circles practices, (5) their relationships with others at Circles, (6) the community climate at Circles, and (7) their beliefs about poverty and about people living in poverty. I expect that completing this survey will take approximately 30 minutes.

In addition to adding this survey (Appendix E), I have also included an updated participant consent form (Appendix B), updated recruitment materials (Appendix D), and an updated project description.

\* Approved documents can be found by logging into the eRA system, opening this protocol, and navigating to the "Versions" folder.

**This approval DOES NOT change the expiration date of your protocol.**

The IRB has approved this amendment in accordance with federal regulations, university policies and ethical standards for the protection of human subjects. In accordance with federal regulation at 45 CFR 46.112, research that has been approved by the IRB may be subject to further appropriate review and approval or disapproval by officials of the institution. The investigator is responsible for knowing and complying with all applicable research regulations and policies including, but not limited to, Environmental Health and Safety, Scientific Advisory Committee, Clinical and Translational Research Center, and Wardenburg Health Center and Pharmacy policies. Approval by the IRB does not imply approval by any other entity.

Please contact the IRB office at 303-735-3702 if you have any questions about this approval or about IRB procedures.

Douglas Grafel  
IRB Admin Review Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board

## APPENDIX G

## UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO IRB CONTINUING LETTER OF APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board  
563 UCB  
Boulder, CO 80309  
Phone: 303.735.3702  
Fax: 303.735.5185  
FWA: 00003492

30-Jan-2012

**Continuing Review Approval - Expedited**

White, Angela

**Protocol #:** 10-0364

**Title:** Meanings and Effects of Communal Communicative Practices at the Boulder County Circles Campaign to End Poverty

Dear Miss White,

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this continuing review in accordance with Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46. You must use the IRB approved informed consent form when obtaining consent from subjects participating in this protocol.

**Approval Date:** 30-Jan-2012

**Expiration Date:** 29-Jan-2013

**Associated Documents:**\* Protocol; Appendix D - Additional Recruitment Materials; Appendix E Survey; 10-0364 Protocol (30Jan12); Participant Consent Form (30Jan12); Continuing Review - eForm;

**Number of subjects approved:**62

**Review Cycle:** 12 months

**Expedited Category:** 7

**Enrollment Status:** Continuing to enroll new subjects

\* Approved documents can be found by logging into the eRA system, opening this protocol, and navigating to the "Versions" folder.

**Regulations require that this protocol be renewed prior to the above expiration date. The IRB will provide a reminder prior to the expiration date, but it is your responsibility to ensure that your continuing review is received in sufficient time to be reviewed prior to the expiration date.**

Changes to your protocol must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to their implementation. This includes changes to the consent form, principal investigator, protocol, etc.

All events that meet reporting criteria must be submitted within 10 business days from notification of the event. Any study-related death must be reported immediately (within 24 hours) upon learning of the death.

The IRB has approved this protocol in accordance with federal regulations, university policies and ethical standards for the protection of human subjects. In accordance with federal regulation at 45 CFR 46.112, research that has been approved by the IRB may be subject to further appropriate review and approval or disapproval by officials of the institution. The investigator is responsible for knowing and complying with all applicable research regulations and policies including, but not limited to, Environmental Health and Safety, Scientific Advisory and Review Committee, Clinical and Translational Research Center, and Wardenburg Health Center and Pharmacy policies. Approval by the IRB does not imply approval by any other entity.

Please contact the IRB office at 303-735-3702 if you have any questions about this letter or about IRB procedures.

Douglas Grafel  
IRB Admin Review Coordinator  
Institutional Review Board

## APPENDIX H

## LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM BOULDER COUNTY CIRCLES CAMPAIGN



## Community Action Programs

### A Division of Community Services

Sundquist Building • 3482 N. Broadway • Boulder, Colorado 80304 • Tel: 303.441.3975 • Fax: 303.441.1541  
 Mailing Address: P.O. Box 471 • Boulder, Colorado 80306 • [www.bouldercountycap.org](http://www.bouldercountycap.org)

Boulder County Circles Campaign  
 Letter of Agreement

January 19, 2011

Dear Angie White,

I am familiar with your research project titled “Meanings and Effects of Communal Communicative Practices at the Boulder County Circles Campaign to End Poverty” and your desire to have the Boulder County Circles Campaign (Circles) involved with it. I understand the role of Circles to be allowing willing volunteers (Allies and Circle Leaders) and staff to be (a) observed and (b) interviewed, and (c) providing access to collected data (including Circle Leaders’ surveys) that participants have consented to the agreed to release and (d) other Circles material (such as the Guiding Coalition handbook).

We have also discussed the role of Circles volunteers and staff, and I am satisfied that their safety and welfare are adequately protected as described in the research protocol. In addition, I understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles and that involvement in this research, for both Circles and all participating volunteers and staff, is strictly voluntary and guarantees the protection of participant’s privacy. In particular, I understand that the investigator cannot provide me with data that might allow anyone other than the research team to identify anyone’s answers unless written permission has been specifically given by the subject. I, Janet Heimer, and other involved Circles staff, understand what, if anything, they expect in return for participation in this research (including a concluding report to Guiding Coalition and review rights prior to any publications).

Therefore, as a representative of the Boulder County Circles Campaign and lead organization, I agree to allow you to conduct your research at our organization. I understand that if any of your research protocols change (i.e., interviewing or observation procedures), you will let me know before further action is taken.

Sincerely,

Janet Heimer  
 Director  
 Boulder County Community Action Programs



## APPENDIX J

## DONATIONS REQUEST EMAIL

Hi Folks,

We are sending this message out among our Circles community to see if we can acquire some items listed below for our Circle Leaders. I will periodically send this kind of e-mail out and hope for the luck and generosity among our community.

Clothing:

- Winter clothes/shoes
- Soft shoes – 7 ½
- Socks, underwear (male & female)
- Boys jeans – 14 husky
- Boys shirt 12/14

Household Items:

- Large Humidifier, air purifier
- Bedding for single bed
- Food dehydrator
- Kitchen chairs

Toiletries:

- Denture soak
- Toothpaste
- Extra Moist Lotions

Services:

- Lawyer
- Dentist – dental implants
- Need weedeater fixed
- Haircut
- Accountant

Entertainment

- Western CDs / DVDs
- CD/DVD player
- Help setting up electronics

Thank you again for all you do, and all your help!

Sincerely,

Liza, Circles Coach

## APPENDIX K

TRANSCRIPT OF “NEW AND GOOD”  
FROM LONGMONT CIRCLES COMMUNITY DINNER MEETING

November 2011

Ally A: Well, my New and Good is that I can see. I just had cataract surgery, and it went well, so that's good. I knew I had cataracts and knew they were terrible cataracts but and I thought well if I could see better for the rest of my life I might as well start now so I decided to go ahead. And I noticed that my distance vision is quite good now and then I can cover my other eye and things are kind of hazy and dim, but I can see, but if I cover this eye, then it's clear and brighter. So that is amazing. (lots of laughter)

A group member: So now you're thinking about the other eye? (lots of laughter from the group)

Ally A: November 3rd. (lots of laughter) Actually I was thinking about having both of them done the same day, but I opted for a special lens that has a multi-focus ability, where a standard lens is mono focus, and usually you get just distance, and you have to wear glasses for reading. And so you just have to do the best that you can. But I don't want that. So I opted for the extra lens, and uh, well . . .

A group member: So you can have bionic eyes? (Lots of laughter)

Ally A: (laughing) Well I thought it was worth it. Even though cost a little bit more and it takes a longer time, well, the doctor wanted to do them in two days just in case it didn't work out well with the first eye. You know, so he could make some little tweaks and what not. But now I'm ready to do it the second eye, because I think the first I turned out just fine.

Various members of the group: All right! Fantastic!

Ally A: And you get good close near vision. Especially after you get the second eye done, because your brain works better when both eyes are doing the same thing.

Various members of the group: Oh yeah. That's good. (Laughter)

Ally A: Otherwise your brain is like trouble!

A group member: Your brain is like what? (Laughter)

Ally A: So that is my New and Good.

Various members of the group: Wow! Fantastic! Congrats.

Ally A: My new eye. (Lots of laughter)

Ally B: Am I next?

Ally C: No, we will go this way.

Ally C: Well I'm [Ally C]. I don't know, um, the last few Saturday night, my kids have been showing up for dinner. And I just throw a few things together, and we just sit around and talk. It seems like the impromptu times are the best. That's all for me.

Leader A: I'm Leader A. And so, my new and good is that for the last . . . . Ha, [Ally C], you're so cute. [Leader C's] all smiley. (laughter) Ok, so for the last like year and 1/2 to 2 years...

A group member: When did you start?

Leader A: A little over two years ago. So I started a little over two years ago trying to get the house. And you guys know Marco? Well, we are neighbors. It's been a long haul. We all built 500 hours, and we took a ton of classes, we did all this stuff, and then in the end they were like, "You know what? You can't have this house unless you switch jobs." So I did switch jobs. And then there was an issue with my payroll. So I worked that out. And then they said, "Since you switched jobs, your original application has been changed, so you're disqualified." So they were going to boot me! And I was like, "But you told me to switch jobs!" And so, I was a mess. And then they were like, "Well, okay, we will still take your application if you clear every single debt on your credit report." And we're talking over \$20,000 worth of debt! Old debt! And I said, "That's crazy, its old debt, it's no longer being collected, because it's over 10 years old." And they said, "Well, we think it would prove what a neat person you are if you clear out all of your debt." And I thought, "Oh man, well that wasn't really part of the original bargain, but okay." So I faced that challenge. And it was very difficult, sometimes I felt it was just too difficult, and then many times I said, well I think I should just step away from this house, because I just can't do this. It's too much. And Joan said, "No you don't! You can do this, and you better! You have worked too damn hard for this house!"

(lots of laughter from the group)

Leader A: . . . so she kept telling me that. And [an Ally] came with me to the meetings and was there with me and then [the Habitat for Humanity staff] were like "Well, we never said that!"

Ally C: Yeah I think they got scared of us!

(lots of laughter from the group)

Leader A: While I've found that bringing a man with me, or bringing a person in of more power or dominance, really helped me. Because before I was by myself and it was one way. And then, I had all this help, and they changed their tune. And then the next time I brought [an Ally] and [Ally C], and they were like "Oh crap, she's not going to back off!" (Laughter) And I made sure to bring people with me every time, so they couldn't say, "Oh well, we didn't say that," because there was a lot of that going on. And so, um, Friday night I got an e-mail saying, "we reviewed

all of the stuff we made you bring in—all these letters, it was just a kind of stuff—and we decided you did everything we said, so, you got the house.”

A group member: Yea! (clapping and cheering from the group)

Leader A: And so they got a good faith estimate from me, and they’re going to go back and keep building—because they quit building, because they didn’t think I would finish, and they started building Marco’s place, so now they’re going to go back and finish, just a few little things—and hopefully I’ll be in there by next month.

Various members of the group: Wow! Awesome!

(clapping and cheering from the group)

Various members of the group: Way to stick with it! Way to go!

Leader A: So yay to, um, to [an Ally] and [Ally C], because I wouldn’t have this without them. And she told me I have to stop crying, because I’ve been so happy and crying about this.

(laughter)

A group member: Oh yea, how wonderful.

Leader A: I haven’t owned a home in, like, 20 years. And my kids and I have moved so many times and we haven’t ever stayed in one place for more than 2 years. We had to move every time I lost a job or . . . so this is massive, this is huge. To have my own place, that no one can say, “You’re not allowed to have a kitty!” or “Your grass is too long!” or “You can’t paint the house!” or “Turn that music down!” except for Marco, I guess, since we will be neighbors!

(lots of laughter from the group)

A group member: Well you’ll have a babysitter then.

Leader A: That’s true. At first I was nervous, because it went from being a single-family home to being an attached home, a duplex. And I was like, “Oh, you’re going to hear us, with the music, and my daughter singing opera!” And Marco was like, “Oh, you’re going to hear the baby crying!” And we were both like, “Oh no, are we going to annoy each other?” But Marco said he walked out of his house the other day, and they were building in my house, and then he went back in and couldn’t hear anything. It’s like that commercial where the chick lays on the mattress, and get stopped, and lays back down . . .

(lots of laughter)

Leader A: So we think it’s going to be all good, but will see. I hope it works out.

Various members of the group: Awesome! Big news.

Circles Coach Liza: Well, I'm Liza, and, um, my mind is a blank for anything else. (laughter). Hearing that is my new and good. Being here is my new and good. (starts to cry and pauses for a minute). I'm sorry that I'm getting emotional, but, just being around so many people, trying so hard, and just the whole basic tenet of Circles, you just get community together and you can really, you can just do amazing things. Oh now I'm really crying. (lots of laughter). And all these Allies, are just doing such amazing things, and they're all working so hard to keep it up, and I just will never be able to tell you how wonderful I think you all are. Sorry. (cries more while lots of laughter from the group).

A group member. It's ok! (laughter)

A group member: But you know what, Liza, we have all been through it. There are things that everyone in this room has been through, and look at what's going on, look at how wonderful we have all come together. We are on a roll.

A group member: That's right, we are on a roll.

A group member: Woo hoo!

Leader A: And [Ally C] even made the brownies today. She wanted to hide them until after I did my new and good, because she said they were housewarming brownies (laughter)

A group member: And [Ally D], what did you name them?

Ally D: Brownies for Humanity!

(lots of laughter)

Leader A: And they have a little house on it, and she even did a little grass! So those are my brownies for humanity!

Various members of the group: Yum! Thanks! Well they are very delicious!

Ally C: Well that was also my New and Good, [Leader A's] success, but I actually have more.

A group member: But there's more!

Ally C: So by some miracle, my son finished culinary school in two years! And that in itself, if you knew his history, is amazing.

(laughter)

Ally C: And [my son] has been living with me for six weeks now, because he's got two jobs, one in Vail and the other one here, and he's got to figure out which one he wants. And so he gets away with me for six weeks, and we're all eating well! So, I can't believe it but he finished

culinary school. Would you know, before that he was a carpenter! (laughter) And now he'll have money to pay rent at my house! (laughter)

Ally C: Oh I'll make him work it off! (laughter)

A group member: Honey-do's

Ally C: Oh my God, I have my list, I mean it was huge.

A group member: Nice.

Ally E: I'm [Ally E], and um, I certainly can't top that one! (laughter). So I won't even try. Let see, um, got back from Yellowstone about a week ago, and I just had a really nice time. Probably especially because it was a real time to reconnect with my husband. You know how busy you get just running around everywhere and so it was just really important.

Ally F: Wonderful. Um, I'm [Ally F], and um, my New and Good is that I got a job a few weeks ago.

Various group members: Nice! Wow! Fantastic!

Ally G: Well I'm [Ally G] and I've decided to start writing down my New and Goods because I forget them, but I want to remember them, because good things happen during the week and I often forget to share them! I've been feeling very creative about finding resources that benefit my son that also benefit myself, because, well, I won't tell you the whole story, but that's why I write it down! (laughter) So, things are great for me.

Ally H: So my name's [Ally H], and as I'm listening to you all I'm thinking of how wonderful it is to hear all these great things: new eye, new chef, new house! And I've got something great too, I had a wonderful success story at my job. I was reading this book, and there was this passage about when you do things that please your spirit, your true self, your other decisions fall into place, and your life, it, it transforms your life, as opposed to running around and trying to please other people. And so I shared this [with a client] and it made me feel so good that I was able to share that, and it made me feel so good and kind of glowy, and so I just wanted to share that with you all.

Leader B: I'm [Leader B], and my other half, or I'm her other half I guess, and we did a gun show together, and we worked good together. And we don't even have to tell each other anything!

A group member: Well that is a sign! (group laughs)

Leader C: I'm [Leader C], and I've been working on a diet, and I had a really good first week. That's all. I've been doing really good.

Circles Coach Liza: But you did have a celebratory brownie tonight, right? (laughter from the group)

Leader C: I did! Don't tell! (laughs)

(lots of laughter from the group)

Ally E: Well thanks everybody for sharing! Ok, now, announcements . . .

## APPENDIX L

## MEETING HANDOUT ON STAGES OF CIRCLE DEVELOPMENT

<b>Stages of Circle Development</b>		
<b>Stage</b>	<b>Ally</b>	<b>Circle Leader</b>
Stage #1 Honeymoon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excitement to be giving back to the community</li> <li>• Compassion for the Circle leader family</li> <li>• Desire to teach Circle leaders how to be successful in the ways I have been successful</li> <li>• Circle tackles straightforward task and succeeds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excitement to have allies to support me</li> <li>• Gratitude for the involvement, ideas, contributions from my allies</li> <li>• Desire to make a positive impression on allies; worry about being judged</li> <li>• Circle tackles straightforward task and succeeds</li> </ul>
Stage #2 Disillusionment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustration that the Circle leader family doesn't make the choices I would make</li> <li>• Trying to "fix" the Circle leader</li> <li>• Acting like a parent/social service provider instead of friend</li> <li>• Giving more than I want to give and feeling resentful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustration that I'm not getting what I need from my allies</li> <li>• Frustration that the ally doesn't really get it about living in poverty</li> <li>• Acting like a client instead of a friend</li> <li>• Doing what my allies want me to even if it doesn't fit for me and feeling resentful</li> </ul>
Stage #3 Insight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realization of how little I really understand about living in poverty</li> <li>• Joining with the family as a friend, lessening judgments</li> <li>• Realizing that I need to "do" less and "be with" more</li> <li>• Figuring out how to set limits so I don't build resentment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing how I could take leadership in the Circle to get what I need</li> <li>• Helping ally understand what poverty is really like; learning about the middle-class world from them</li> <li>• Joining with the ally as a friend, not expecting them to do "for" me</li> </ul>
Stage #4 Working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respects Circle leader's right to chose</li> <li>• Available to help in the way the Circle leader requests, not the way I think it should be</li> <li>• Sets limits as appropriate to avoid resentment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I know what I need from my Circle and ask for it directly</li> <li>• Confronting difficult patterns in my life with support</li> <li>• Trusting my allies enough to take difficult feedback from them</li> </ul>