SEEKING GOOD SAM:
UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY AMONG FULL-TIME RVERS

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Recreation Administration in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies.

Chapel Hill
2006

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ABSTRACT

K.M. Parentin: Seeking Good Sam: Understanding Community Among Full-Time RVers

(Under the Direction of Deborah Bialeschki)

This study sought to offer a better understanding of the culture of RVing by exploring how full-time RVers describe the community to which they belong. This study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm using symbolic interactionism as the guiding framework. In-depth interviews were conducted with sixteen individuals who spent at least six months of every year residing in their recreational vehicle. Data were collected at campgrounds located in the American Midwest. An understanding of the values and customs of full-timers was gained through these conversational interviews that may be described as a balance of commitment. This balance of commitment was illustrated along a continuum called the concept of parsimonious commitment. This concept suggested that interviewees acted economically with their commitment to the community of RVers—whereas full-time RVers committed as much as necessary to gain the benefits of their community while taking care not to commit so much as to forfeit the freedom and autonomy that made the lifestyle of RVing so pleasurable.

For Jeff

In Memoriam

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A simple thank you is an entirely inadequate way of acknowledging the direction, work, and emotional support that was given to me gratuitously throughout my experiences at UNC. Therefore, while I simply say thanks now, please know that I intend to pass on the effort to others who seek our common missions.

Thank you to the faculty of the UNC department of Recreation and Leisure Studies who each, individually, gave me a new perspective on a profession and mission I have always loved. Thank you Karla, for having the patience to help me become a better writer by helping me redress the spelling, grammar, and dangling prepositions up with which you would not put. Thank you Diane, for reminding me of those who require and deserve the assistance of our community. Thank you John, for indulging in theoretical debates that, in the end, always resulted in an understanding that the social rules and relations borne in peoples' leisure are eroded by a cash economy. And thank you Deb, for seeing this project (among many other projects) through to the end, in spite of bureaucratic iniquity. Your perseverance and moral fiber shepherded the students of this department long after duty obliged.

Thank you to the people of the UNC Outing Club for the greatest of adventures, who more or less lived up the club motto: δεν επιτρέπουμε τα φάρμακα, δεν επιτρέπουμε το οινόπνευμα, αλλά από το Θεό θα υπάρξει φύλο.

As ever, thank you Mel and Gail. Your money, sympathy, and love have been unwarranted yet not wasted on an ever-grateful son.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The word camping has a nebulous definition that can be interpreted in innumerable ways. To one person, camping may mean sleeping on a thin foam pad atop the ice of a frozen lake that borders the US and Canada. To someone else, camping may mean parking beside an Arizona desert oasis in a one million dollar air-conditioned recreational vehicle. The two worlds of *wilderness travelers* and *RVers* may seem galaxies apart. The great irony, however, is the proximal existence that these two groups share. Though both groups have incongruent definitions of camping, RVers and wilderness travelers share the same spaces—National and State Parks, scenic areas, monuments, and historical sites. These places often define their lives and serve as an expression of their character. These places may in fact be where their community exists. In the campground of a National Park, RVers may see scrubby backpackers passing through a campground on their way to a wilderness trailhead. Those same backpackers may see the RVers in the relative opulence of their motorized mansions. And yet, a word is rarely shared between them.

I suspect that snobbery is not what segregates RVers and wilderness travelers. Like most instances of sectarianism, the discord may be due to the trepidation that comes with the mystery of an unfamiliar person. "Why on earth would someone want to camp like that? " an RVer or backpacker might ask of each other.

The mysteriousness of RVing is due in large part to the relative obscurity of the RV culture. Many RVers are retirees who have left their homes, work, friends, and families to live—full-time—in constant motion on the road. In a country where community is synonymous with place, the culture of full-timers has become difficult to understand or even contact. A full-timer is not bound to anyone's schedule but one's own. Some do not have a permanent postal address or phone number. Some do not even wish to be contacted. And so full-timers have continued to exist as an unnoticed culture. Statistics about their numbers are dodgy at best. Certainly academics or researchers have not paid full-timers their fair share of attention.

The American Census Bureau has only recently attempted to take stock of people who live full-time in an RV, although the results have left officials as nonplussed as ever (Edwards, 2000). Without any formal procedure to account for full-timers, the Census Bureau simply counted RVers as residents of the state in which they happened to be parked during the time of the count. This attempt to account for RVers hardly gave an accurate observation.

Purpose

With little recognition by other citizens and no collective voice (directed at mainstream America) of their own, RVers could be among the most overlooked culture in America. Without sufficient voice, RVers may be left without the recognition they deserve. I certainly could not hope to provide RVers the voice they deserve. I can, however, hope to begin a trend of inquiry that might uncover this American culture that receives almost no attention by mainstream America. Exploring the way in which full-timers establish the social connections that create their community may be the most

effective way to begin understanding their culture. With some attention and understanding, we may learn some important lessons from our transient and temporary neighbors. This study's purpose was to explore if and how retirees develop community within the culture of full-time RVing.

Research Questions

To explore how full-time RVers define the community in which they exist, I guided my study by asking: (a) How do RVers describe the community in which they exist; (b) What are the relationships like among other full-time RVers; and (c) How does full-time RVing affect the relationships of a full-timer's previous stationary home-life?

Delimitations

The sample was limited to people who spent at least six months of every year living in their RV. Interviews took place at campgrounds along major highways in the American Midwest. These campgrounds specialized in hosting full-time and vacationing RVers as opposed to stationary people who reside in mobile-homes. Located on popular RVer routes of travel (e.g. Route 66), the wide-reaching appeal of these campgrounds ensured a sample that included a broad and representative group of RVers who had diverse origins and itineraries. A sample that originated from areas all over North America offered the perspectives that were necessary to attain an accurate look at the full-time RVer culture.

The sample was selected based on an apparent ability to articulate a personal perception of community among people who full-time. I first asked preliminary questions of people who appeared to be camping with a recreational vehicle. These questions sought to establish: (a) whether or not the campground visitor was camping

with a recreational vehicle, (b) how long the campground visitor spent traveling in her/his recreational vehicle each year, and (c) if the campground visitor had time for an interview. If a campground visitor fit within the parameters of my study, they were asked to schedule a time that was both convenient for them and provided ample time for the 45 (or more) minute interview. Interviews were generally scheduled for later that day/evening or early the next day. The abruptness in scheduling was necessary due to the inherent transience of campground visitors.

Rationale

An apparent gap exists within research that concerns people who spend their retirement years traveling in a recreational vehicle. Not only has the amount of time the average American spends in retirement increased to 1/5 of a person's life, the amount of people who are retired is also about to increase substantially (AARP, 1999). If the number of people who participate in RV associations is any indication of the interest in full timing in the North America, it behooves leisure researchers to be aware of the culture that surrounds the activity and develop a body of knowledge reflective of the reality of the RVer culture.

Definitions

To begin to approach the ways in which full-time RVers define their community, I must first define, within the context of this study, who will be included as functionally a full-time RVer. Despite the lack of attention academic research has given to the social meanings of RVing, previous research has, thus far, managed to define the terminology used within the culture of RVing.

Community. For this study, the concept of community must be considered outside the shared territories of static domiciles and neighborhoods common in traditional explanations of community. Instead I will consider community more as the social bonds that tie individuals together in spite of shared territory or common space (Myers, 1941).

Full-Timing. Full-timing is a colloquialism used among RVers to refer to people who spend the majority of their time traveling in their RV. While the term has taken on delicate nuances among different subgroups within the RVing culture (Born, 1976; Counts & Counts, 1992; Hartwigsen & Null, 1990; Jobes, 1984), the term has a strong central commonality among researchers. For this study, the term full-timer will be used to describe retirees who spend six months or more out of each year traveling in a recreational vehicle.

Mobile-Home. A mobile-home will be defined as a trailer or camper that can be moved or pulled behind a vehicle but is left stationary for the majority of time. Mobile homes are commonly associated with stationary communities that move only very rarely.

Retiree. Retiree is a term that often describes a person who has finished their professional career. However, an almost limitless array of people may be encompassed in such a broad term. Some young people may retire early in life. Some people, while technically retired, continue to work in some manner (Gee & Baillie, 1999; Stein, 2000). For this study, the term retiree will refer to people who are above the age of 55 and are not involved in a professional full-time career.

RVing. RVing is the activity of traveling via recreational vehicle.

Recreational Vehicle. HUD describes an RV as a vehicle "designed for recreational, seasonal, or emergency occupancy and are built to nationally recognized

recreational vehicle standards" (Housing and Urban Development, 1976). For this study, an RV will be defined as a trailer or camper that is used as living space and is not stationary for more than several days at a time.

Summary

Full-time RVers are members of a culture that have existed in relative obscurity. Because of their transience and lack of defined place in America, full-timers have gone unnoticed even by the Census Bureau. With this study, I hope to begin a trend of inquiry into the culture of full-timing by investigating if and how full-time RVers develop community. The research questions that guide my study are: (a) How do RVers describe the community in which they exist; (b) What are the relationships like among full-timers; (c) How does full-time RVing affect the relationships of a full-timer's previous stationary home-life? To answer these questions I sought to interview full-time RVers who visited campgrounds in the American Midwest.

CHAPTER II

Existing Literature

American highways have long been a representation of the American disposition. People from the United States, unlike any other nation on Earth, travel primarily by personal vehicle. Much more than by train, bus, or even aircraft, American's have chosen to visit our towns, our countryside, and each other in the relative solitude of an automobile. The solitude of the personal vehicle embodies the individualism that defines the American spirit. The motorist is lone, self-sufficient, and free from anyone else's agenda.

RVing has become a popular way of expressing the vehicular wanderlust that is so characteristically American. A visit to any National Park, popular scenic area, or historical site will afford an exhibit of countless—monstrous—Winnebagos roaring from overlook to overlook. Often, stuck proudly on the rear bumper or windshield, is the gooney smile of Good Sam, the logo of the largest club for RVers in North America (Good Sam Club, n.d.). Good Sam, short for Good Samaritan, is a symbol for the good will and affability of the RVing culture. With this study, I intend to offer a peek into that culture and explore the community of the good Samaritans in their own environment: the RV campground.

Popular publications have recently taken an interest in the people who travel North American highways (i.e., the United States, Canada, and Mexico) in recreational vehicles. *Time* and *National Geographic* (Grossman, 2001; Wolinsky, 2001) have

dedicated many pages of print to tell human-interest stories of people who have decided to spend their retirement cruising in an RV. In an article on RVer culture, *National Geographic* (Wolinsky, 2001) explored the largest encampment of RVers in North America. In November of each year, approximately 175,000 full-time RVers flock to Quartzsite, Arizona, to spend the winter together. Described as a pilgrimage by people interviewed, Quartzsite exists as the Mecca for all who full-time.

The full-timers of Quartzsite described themselves as a culture apart from mainstream America. RVers have their own language, for example: *boondocking*, which means to camp without amenities such as electricity; *snowbird*, which means to migrate with the seasons; and *third wheel*, which means a larger trailer that is made easier to control by connecting to a hitch in the bed of a truck (Blais, 2002; Wolinsky, 2001). RVers also encounter daily challenges unique to their culture: storing and dumping waste, finding legal places to park, and RVing traffic being banned by an increased number of municipalities (Blais, 2002). Full-timers therefore have viewed themselves as existing in a world not completely understood by people outside their culture.

Classic American literature has also venerated people who travel the American highway while self-contained in their personal vehicle. One such book is John Steinbeck's (2002) American literary classic "Travels with Charlie." In his book, Steinbeck documented his experiences full-timing on America's back-roads. Charles Kuralt (1989) virtually invented the human-interest story while collecting the stories for his book "On the Road with Charles Kuralt" by wandering from small-town to small-town interviewing locals. Interestingly, both books were written—literally—in the back of a recreational vehicle. In spite of this limited attention by popular culture and

literature, scholarly researchers have given little regard to people who spend their time

RVing (Counts & Counts, 1992).

The Good Sam Club, North America's largest RV club, claims to retain over a

million members (Good Sam Club, n.d.). The Good Sam Club is an example of only one

of an estimated 40 RV clubs catering to the different interests of RVers in North America

(Counts & Counts, 1992). If the number of memberships to RVing clubs offers even a

roughly accurate estimate of how many people in the U.S. participate in RVing, then one

can reasonably assume that RVing represents a substantial leisure interest.

Recreation and Community

Community has been an important theme for recreation professionals since the

dawn of the recreation profession in the early years of the 20th Century. Rather than

provide avocational pastimes to restore and refresh participants, recreation programming

existed as a means for social-change and reform (Cavallo, 1981; Hemingway, 1999;

Perry, 1984; Stormann, 1991). Specifically, recreation professionals within the

burgeoning field of recreation were concerned with the reformation of migrant

communities in industrial city neighborhoods to mitigate crime and youth truancy

(Cavallo, 1981; Hemingway, 1999; Perry, 1984; Stormann, 1991). These social-change

movements—like the playground movement, the rational recreation movement, and the

industrial recreation movement—were, at their core, created in the interest of developing

communities that reflected existing values in America (Cavallo, 1981; Hemingway,

1999).

Arai and Pedlar (1997) described the importance of community as being

"absolutely central to our implicit understanding of leisure and recreation" (p. 8). In a

study of community development, they found that feelings of empowerment were attached to one's relation to community. More specifically, a person's feelings of value to their community, as well as their ability to contribute to the accomplishment of their community's goals resulted in an overall feeling of personal empowerment. The resulting sense of both individual and collective empowerment engaged the community's ability to act effectively. Arai and Pedlar further explained that when a community can determine its own action, "It is through such action that communities gain strength and begin the process of reclaiming responsibility for individual and collective well being" (p. 8).

Stormann (1996) described community empowerment as the capability of a community to collectively and autonomously create solutions to problems. He described the necessity of democracy within a community thus: "When a community loses its independence, its autonomy, democracy, the essence of community, is lost as well. For democracy is by definition a citizenry who sets their own rules" (p. 146).

Not all recreation programs have resulted in communities that are more democratic or empowered. Stormann (1996) described some forms of recreation as diametrically opposed to the basic values of community. For example, recreation professionals have in recent years abandoned socially-minded programming that encourages community empowerment. In place of socially-minded programs, recreation professionals have come to idealize a corporate culture that favors privatization and minimal public scrutiny or involvement. In other words, recreation professionals have come to react to profit and revenue rather than advocate for more empowered and democratic communities. The result of recreation professional's recent emulation of a

corporate model has been the promotion of choices that distract from the essential qualities of community empowerment and democracy (Stormann, 1991; Stormann 1996). Community empowerment and democracy are two qualities that Stormann (1996) has described as necessarily present for active and meaningful community involvement.

Pedlar (1996) agreed with Storrmann's (1996) assertions that recreation professionals have abandoned civic-minded development of community in favor of a reactive role of marketing and revenue development. Pedlar viewed recreation professional's focus on finance as problematic. She asserted that the responsibility of recreation professionals is not to react to revenue but instead to close the gap between the haves and have-nots by acting as "community bridgers and connectors" (p. 17).

Hemingway (1999) criticized the earliest programs of recreation professionals, specifically the playground movement, the rational recreation movement, and the industrial recreation movement for promoting overly passive and conforming forms of citizenship rather than fostering citizen and community empowerment. Some types of recreation may even disengage people from active community participation and are "contrary to authentic community involvement" (Stormann, 1996 p. 155). Therefore, some recreational programs with the ostensible mission of social-change and reform may be regarded as actually counterproductive to the achievement of an empowered community.

Fain (1991) explained recreation professionals abandonment of social-minded programming as an abandonment of leisure's ideal. Fain's ideal has its origins in classical Greece rather than turn of the century American recreation professionals. Originating specifically in Aristotle's Metaphysics, the outcomes of leisure activities

were reflective thinking, generating ideas, and the achievement of dignity through transcendence of work and utility. However, recreation is no longer presented as a foundation for moral virtue like that of the social-change movements of which Hemingway (1999) and Stormann (1991) expounded. Fain (1991) explained that leisure's present (popular) definition has degenerated from its original mission as a driver of social-change within communities. Recreation, instead, "[is] now synonymous with any free time activity, is understood as a form of activity, vacant time, or state of pleasing relaxation" (Fain, 1991 p. 8). Though Fain described the current motives of recreational programming—with its emphasis on money over mission—as "amoral" (Fain, 1991, p. 8), he also explained that "every act of leisure has moral meaning" (p. 7). In other words, regardless of motivation, every leisure activity inevitability results in some effect on a community *for either the better or the worse*.

Rojek (1999) also explained that recreational activities result in unavoidable outcomes upon community. Recreation programs have in the past been used as a driver for social-change movements that inspire community empowerment like suffragism, Marxism, and feminism. However, Rojek like Fain (1991), warned that recreation's effects on community are not without significant danger. An equal possibility exists for recreation to be used for nefarious purposes like the *Kraft dur Freude* (p. 88) movement that indoctrinated, through recreation, young Germans into the Nazi Party (Rojek, 1999). These forms of *deviant leisure* have been either ignored by recreation professionals or regarded as the domains of pathology and criminology. However, recreation professionals are due equal responsibility for recreational programs and philosophies that go awry.

Recreation has historically played a role in the improvement and development of communities. Over time, however, the mission of recreation has drifted from social-change toward goals of profit and revenue development. Recreation professionals must not simply provide avocational pastimes that distract from work and turn a profit. Instead recreating professionals must accept the inevitable social implications that recreation has on the communities in which we live. Recreation's inevitable effects upon our communities will be for either the better or the worse (Cavallo, 1981; Fain, 1991; Hemingway 1999; 2001; Pedlar 1997; Rojek, 1999, Stormann 1991; 1996). Therefore, recreation professionals must not ask *if* recreation is creating or empowering community, but instead ask what kind of community might be formed by the recreational activities that we choose to promote.

Recreation and Retirement

Retirement has become an increasingly substantial part of Americans' lives. At the turn of the 20th century, only about 2% of an American's life was spent in retirement; however that percentage has risen to close to 20% during the last 100 years (Seligman, 1994; Vierck, 1990). Not only are Americans experiencing more time in retirement, but the number of retired persons in the U.S. is about to experience a sharp increase. A survey conducted by AARP (1999) has tracked the pending retirement of the baby-boom generation. This survey explained that within the next fifteen to twenty years, approximately seventy-six million members of this generation are going to enter retirement as the largest single generation wave in history.

A retiree's health may depend on negotiating the transition into retirement carefully. In fact, the transition into retirement may become one of the most precarious

times in a person's life. Studies have indicated a relationship between retirement with a subsequent and relatively sudden decline in physical health (Bazzoli, 1985; Ellison, 1968; Haynes, McMichael, & Tyroler 1977; Holloway & Youngblood, 1985; Hull, 1990; Martin & Doran, 1966; Minkler, 1981; Myers, 1954). Attributing retirees' decline in physical health solely to the retirement transition is problematic. Other possible factors such as income loss and separation from social-networks may be intertwined (Minkler, 1981). Though the specific causes may be difficult to isolate, retirees experience significantly elevated mortality rates from ailment within four years of retirement (Haynes et al., 1977; Minkler, 1981).

Evidence exists that also indicates a relationship between retirement and a decline in the mental-health of retirees. The months immediately following retirement have been linked to an increased rate of suicide among people who have recently experienced the transition from work to retirement (Breed, 1963; Miller, 1979; Powell, 1958; Resnik, 1968; Seiden, 1981). Elevated rates of suicide among recently retired persons have been associated with stress factors related to the events that follow the transition into retirement: loss of employment, reduced financial status (Resnik, 1968; Seiden, 1981) and loss of social status, influence, and power (Miller, 1979).

The uncertainty of retirement can render significant stress upon a person who has recently retired. It is common then, for a retiree to cope with this transition through the assumption of a role of sickness (Ellison, 1968). This role of sickness may be a response to the helplessness that some retirees may feel "as the sick man is helpless with respect to his illness, the retired man is helpless with respect to the encroachment of age," (Ellison, 1968, p.191). Ellison explained that in order to cope with the uncertainties of retirement

retirees often "give up" (p. 192) and assume the behaviors of one who is ill. Although the causes for the *sick role* are thought to be largely psychosomatic, sickness may become "an instance of self full-filling prophecy" (Ellison, p.191). In other words, a retiree who feels sick due to despair, may in-turn become sick in reality.

Retirement is an act of leaving behind a role in which people define themselves socially and economically (Bazzoli, 1985; Ellison, 1968; Holloway & Youngblood, 1986; Powell, 1958). These roles often exist as a major part of a person's self-concept (Minkler, 1981; Ellison, 1968). Therefore, when a person transitions into retirement, it is important to have a new role that may define them. Ellison (1968) found that the most effective factor in mitigating the helplessness and hopelessness during the retirement transition was found in a retiree's regard for leisure. Ellison (1968) explained:

> When leisure becomes an enjoyable part of living for all levels of society, these attitudes may be changed and the prognosis associated with retirement improved. When retirement is viewed as an "impaired role," it is likely that the circle of despair may be broken and the retired role be viewed as an opportunity (p. 192).

The assumption of a new role—through one's leisure—may encourage a retiree to feel hopeful so that she/he may experience a healthful transition. Ellison further suggested that leisure may reduce the stress of transitioning into retirement, and act as a substitute for the economical, social, and psychological functions that were once achieved through working.

Recreation has been found to be an important factor in the overall experience of retirement. A variety of disciplines have conducted several studies focused on retirement planning and the retirement experience. In leisure studies as well as the disciplines of psychology and sociology researchers have found that planning for leisure in retirement

has a profound effect on a retiree's overall life satisfaction (Gee & Baillie, 1999; Liptack, 1990; Riddick & Stewart, 1994; Taylor-Carter, Cook, & Weinberg, 1996). In a study done within the field of psychology, Taylor-Carter et al. (1996) explored the effects of different types of retirement planning. Their findings explained that:

> Given the positive association between leisure, retirement adjustment, and reactions to retirement, we believed that those who had engaged in more extensive informal leisure planning would anticipate a more pleasurable retirement experience and would have more confidences in their ability to negotiate the retirement transition successfully (p. 276).

Given all the variables tested, leisure planning had the most pronounced effects on participants' experience with retirement. Leisure planning was found to influence both perceived ability to make a healthful transition into retirement and an anticipated overall satisfaction with retirement.

Recreation professionals should be aware of the abundance of people who are presently and soon to be retired. There is evidence that many of these people will likely choose to spend their retirement traveling in a recreational vehicle (Hartwigsen & Null, 1990; Jobes, 1984). Over 40 RV clubs currently exist that together include well over one million members (Counts & Counts, 1992; Good Sam Club, n.d.). With so many baby-boomers on the verge of retirement, the number of RVers will likely increase substantially in the coming years.

Recreational activities like RVing may be an important factor to baby-boomers' healthful transition and overall experience with retirement. With the prediction that so many people will spend their retirement living full-time in an RV, the exploration of full-time RVing should be important to recreation professionals.

Full-timing

Though the term has taken on delicate nuances within the different subcultures of RVing, full-timing has become an accepted colloquialism to describe people who reside the majority of the time traveling in recreational vehicles (Born, 1976; Counts & Counts, 1992; Hartwigsen & Null, 1990; Jobes, 1984). In a study of RVing as a new mode of retirement (Jobes, 1984), researchers found that full-timers defined themselves by how much time they spent in their "rig" or RV. Data gathered via in-depth interviews revealed sharp distinctions in relation to a person's status within the RV culture.

A "vacation traveler" (Jobes, 1984) falls at the lowest end of the scale. This status refers to those who travel in their RV occasionally, a few weekends or an extended vacation yearly. Generally fully employed with a permanent residence, vacation travelers maintain social relationships exclusively at home.

A person who travels at least four months a year in an RV was considered a "seasonal traveler" (Jobes, 1984). Seasonal travelers maintain permanent residence and establish social relationships primarily at home. The seasonal traveler status often serves as an interim stage where an RVer may experiment with the full-timer lifestyle.

The status of "full-timer" (Jobes, 1984) is reserved for those folks who consider their RV a permanent residence. Full-timers, however, were not found to be capricious wanderers. Most full-timers were found to be fond of particular circuits of travel and frequented the same spots seasonally. A common practice involved a weather based migration pattern that directed full-timers south in the winter then back north in the summer. This migration pattern has earned full-timers the additional nickname "snow-birds."

The study by Jobes (1984) also sought to challenge the application of disengagement theory to retirees who spent their retirement RVing. Jobes refuted the application of disengagement theory to retired RVers by explaining that, while retirees were "withdrawing from long standing orientations" that existed at their previous stationary residence, they were "[moving] toward meaningful interaction" with people whom they met while RVing (p. 183). Put simply, Jobes argued that retirees who full-time were not necessarily running *from* something but instead running *to* something new and just as meaningful where the benefits of community did exist.

Two anthropologists (Counts & Counts, 1992) conducted a study using in-depth interviews where they sought to understand how "RV nomads" form community. The researchers pointed out a problem with the contemporary sociological definition of community because of an implied attachment between the formation of community and "shared territory" (p. 155). This definition becomes outmoded when applied to a transient culture such as RVers.

Counts and Counts (1992) found that full-timers developed a sense of community in the absence of shared territory or familiarity with their peers. Through shared knowledge full-timers were able to establish roles of family, friend, and neighbor almost instantly by performing rituals like food sharing or offering assistance in setting up a "rig." A repetition of these rituals allowed full-timers to recognize each other apart from "the crazies out there" (Counts & Counts, 1992, p. 179). The authors did not, however, take into account the significance of leisure within these full-timers' lives.

Retirement is a substantial portion and emotionally important part of a person's life. With so many Americans retired and about to retire, recreation professionals should

be aware of how retirees might develop community through their leisure. The popularity of RVing as a mode for retirement warrants the examination of community among this culture.

Summary

Both popular contemporary publications and classic American literature have explored the culture of full-time RVing. In spite of this attention, however, scholarly researchers have given little regard for people who live their lives traveling in a recreational vehicle. The Good Sam Club, America's largest RV club, claims over one million members who live in an RV full-time. If this number gives an accurate estimate of how many people live full-time in an RV, there should in turn be a significant body of research that represents this culture. Recreation inevitably and inescapably affects—for the better or worse—the communities in which we live

CHAPTER III

Methods

Paradigm/Method Choice

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm using *symbolic interactionism* as the guiding framework. With so few studies upon which to build the foundation of my study, I thought it was important to allow this study to be open to any and all concepts that may have emerged. An attempt at theory testing would have had little prior research from which to create guiding questions. Essentially, theory testing would have been a fishing expedition. Conducting this study in the interpretive paradigm fostered the emergence of ideas by allowing the RVers to describe—in their own words—the factors that created the community in which they lived. Allowing the RVers to explain their experiences from their own perspectives and in their own words allowed for the discovery of the unexpected (Henderson, 1991).

Previous research on RVers has supported and emphasized the importance of in-depth interviewing. An anthropological study focusing on full-timers was initiated with the intention of gathering both qualitative and quantitative data (Counts & Counts, 1992). However, once the researchers made contact with their sample, much of the data gathered via survey (distributed by hand) appeared to be erroneous. The people in the study found the technique of surveying too impersonal and therefore answered the questionnaires incompletely or with obviously false information. However, the researchers found the sample responded well to in-depth interviewing. The researchers found conversational

interviewing to be successful among the RVers "because [it] made us all equals and they could ask us questions too" (Counts & Counts, 1992, p. 157).

Symbolic interactionism was suited for research among RVers because the framework required me to "actively enter the worlds of people being studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 124). Where individuals are skeptical of outsiders (as RVers were proven to be in previous studies), the personal contact and fellowship that symbolic interactionism afforded seemed necessary.

Symbolic interactionism was also appropriate for this study because I was forced to look past how behaviors existed objectively and instead look to the meanings those behaviors held for the interviewees. In other words, the meanings behind what the RVers said was more important than the words actually spoken. The symbolic meanings of the data shared by interviewees are represented by the themes and sub-themes in the analysis and interpretation section. This distinction was important because interviewees originated from all over North America. Therefore, interviewees used different terminology or colloquialisms in their descriptions of community, but fundamentally they described the same concepts.

Sampling Procedures

The participants were selected according to theoretical sampling procedures. To do this, I actively sought participants who could offer data that contributed to the theories that were being developed as my study progressed (Creswell, 1998). The goal of this study was to generate an explanation of how community is defined among RVers, so purposive sampling techniques were most effective (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Rather than a numeric aggregate of interviewees, theoretical sampling stressed the importance of

seeking a sample where a common theme was recognized, then pursued and developed into theory (Henderson, 1991).

The sample of this study consisted of sixteen participants with whom I conversed in in-depth formal interviews. The gender ratio of my sample was ten men, six women. Of these individuals, all were over the age of 55 years old. Fifteen of the sixteen interviewees were married and traveling with a spouse. Only one of the participants was single (divorced). As was required for participation, all interviewees lived primarily in their recreational vehicle (at least six months of the year). Furthermore, none of the interviewees owned a stationary home or any other residence outside of their RV. I asked no questions about race/ethnic identification, orientation, religion, or financial status.

Theoretical sampling was also appropriate due to its usefulness in neoteric research studies where the culture is mostly unexplored. Very few theoretical leads had been established by previous research. The flexibility of symbolic interactionism allowed me to take note of a specific theme that emerged within the data offered by one participant and then pursue that theme in the next interview. Strauss and Corbin (1998) described the benefits of theoretical sampling as "important when exploring new or uncharted areas because it enables the researcher to choose those avenues of sampling that can bring about the greatest theoretical return" (p. 202). Since little research exists on the culture of full-timers, it was important that this study remained open to any themes and theories that might have arisen from the research data. I interviewed sixteen RVers who appeared capable of articulating their perception of how community is defined and ceased the interview process upon saturation of theoretical themes.

I determined that my study reached data saturation when I began observing redundant and repetitive themes within the data that I gathered. I was able to judge data saturation by continually analyzing my data. To make this possible, I transcribed my data after each interview as quickly as possible. I then coded the data to discern themes and sub-themes that emerged from each interview. Together, these themes and sub-themes created a broad concept of how the full-timers described the community in which they lived.

Data Collection

Study participants were asked for permission to have our interview tape recorded in its entirety. In addition, I made notes in order to outline the interviewee's main points, and keep myself on track with the interview guide. Shortly after the completion of each interview, notes were recorded within my research journal. These notes included information that completed a broader picture of the interview and the interviewee. Within the journal I documented: (a) major points and themes discussed by the interviewee, (b) the interviewee's type of recreational vehicle, (c) the type of camp spot chosen by the interviewee (i.e., developed or undeveloped), and (d) camp layout (e.g., concrete pad, tables, chairs, BBQ pit, lights).

During preliminary discussions, full-timers expressed a similar concern for privacy as had been found by Counts and Counts (1992). I deliberately and with special consideration explained that (a) real names could not be linked to any given information; (b) I would not use information for commercial purposes; and (c) I would take special precautions to ensure privacy.

This study was conducted under the direction and within the guidelines of the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB). A proposal for this study was submitted to the IRB of the University of North Carolina and subsequently granted an exempt status. All participants of this study were given a cover letter, as prescribed by the IRB, that explained: (a) The purpose of the study in which they were participating, (b) a descriptions of the research procedures, (c) the commitment of their time, (d) that participation is purely voluntary, (e) a description of the risks of participation, (f) contact information of the IRB for questions/comments/concerns, (g) steps to ensure anonymity/confidentiality, (h) freedom to decline or discontinue participation at any time, (i) informed consent. The cover letter was written on UNC stationary with the contact information of the UNC IRB, the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, and the advisor to this study. All participants were asked to sign a consent form that outlined the aforementioned issues.

Data collected on participants of this study were kept strictly confidential. At no time was information including personal information, notes, journal, or interview data available to anyone. Data were coded in a manner that rendered all information undecipherable by any third party other than the researcher and faculty advisor. Each participant was given a pseudonym that appeared on transcriptions and all subsequent documents that included research data. This process ensured that no participant could be identified though any document or materials associated with this study.

I collected data for this study using three methods: informal conversations, documentation of campgrounds, and in-depth interviews. Using three different methods

allowed me to establish a broad perspective of the RVing culture by documenting the informal information offered by campground staff and owners, illustrate the study's surroundings, and record formal interviews with full-time RVers.

Informal Conversations. I collected data through informal conversations with people at campgrounds. These conversations began with a preliminary walk through that preceded me approaching possible interviewees. I recorded notes from these informal conversations within my researcher journal.

Campgrounds. During my preliminary walk through I took detailed notes of the facilities. These notes allowed me to document the physical layout of the campgrounds as well as the amenities that the campgrounds provided.

In-Depth Interviews. My decision to conduct this study within the interpretive paradigm was not arbitrary. The advice of researchers who have interacted with RVers in the past (Counts & Counts, 1992; Jobes, 1984) gave explicit recommendations to avoid the use of surveys or any other sort of "impersonal" (p. 155) data gathering technique. Therefore, I chose to gather data using in-depth interviews. A conversational atmosphere enabled full-timers to feel comfortable enough to share the parts of their lives that explain how community was defined among them and their peers. RVers are a wary group whose trust must be earned by the personal contact of a handshake and a smile. Working within the framework of symbolic interactionism afforded this opportunity.

I conducted all interviews with an interview guide that I created prior to the proposal of this study located in Appendix A. The interview guide helped me focus my interview upon specific questions that I hoped would provoke conversation about community among full-timers. However, I commonly strayed from the specific questions

of this interview guide to explore unforeseen ideas that were offered by interviewees. When an interviewee mentioned a new idea, I recorded notes within my researcher journal. These notes were then commonly used to amend my interview guide with new and more specific questions.

Data Analysis

Once permission was granted all interviews were audio recorded entirely. Interview tapes were then transcribed to type written format as soon as possible so that I had the most accurate transcription possible. Data analysis was conducted through constant comparison techniques. I began with open coding of interview transcripts and journal notes. I read data completely and repeatedly and coded all descriptions and perceptions. My original perceptions were listed as microcodes. I then re-read all microcodes repeatedly until broader overarching themes of similar concepts became apparent (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

The grouping of overarching themes provided macrocodes. Macrocoded concepts were broad enough to provide for the sketching of conceptual maps. Conceptual maps were drawings of conceptual connections illustrated spatially, including all macrocodes gleaned from the data. From these maps the themes and sub themes that made up the evidential data within this study became apparent.

Validity/Data Verification

The lack of mathematics (i.e. numbers/statistics) in a qualitative study makes the verification of research data less explicit. However, with attention to detail and the use of proper techniques, justification of qualitative data should be no less precise (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Techniques used for the verification of qualitative data

may be more abstract than those of a positivist approach. In a quantitative study a look to the tables of statistical numbers can easily provide the evidence necessary for the validation of findings. On the other hand, a reader must read more closely within a qualitative study to accomplish the same verification.

There are many techniques on which a researcher may rely to gain trustworthiness of qualitative data (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Eight techniques are commonly used within qualitative studies: (a) persistent observation, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarification research bias, (f) member check, (g) rich, thick description, and (h) external audit. Of the previous options, Creswell (1998) suggested that the researcher should apply two for substantial verification. I employed the techniques of triangulation, clarification of researcher bias, external audits, and negative case analysis to provide sufficient accountability for my findings. Brief descriptions of verification techniques are found in the following paragraphs.

Triangulation

I used triangulation as a method for both data verification as well as a technique for the preliminary selection of participants (see *Delimitations/Data Collection*). First, the information that I gathered within these preliminary notes was used to qualify a prospective participant for this study. For example, I conducted a preliminary walk-through of a campground taking notes on different campsites. I noted (a) whether the person's rig appeared to be sufficient for full-timing (e.g. use of tents being an indication to the negative), (b) material evidence that people were not retired or not full-timers (e.g. presence of children's toys) (c) the apparent immobilization of a trailer (e.g. being up on

blocks) that placed it in the mobile-home [irony notwithstanding] category rather than RV.

Second, the information gathered during a preliminary walk-through as well as during the preliminary questioning was snowballed into more in-depth questions during the formal interview. For example, during a preliminary walk-through I once noticed heat tape wrapped around a full-timer's black-water (sewage) pipe that led into the ground. When I asked the couple sitting outside about this observation, they explained that this was a trick to keep sewage from freezing and clogging the pipe. They continued by explaining that they learned this from a few Manitoban RVers they had meet up north, and before I knew it, I was getting data on the exchange of information between RVers before I could even turn on my recorder. The use of the preliminary walk-through and questioning forced me to explore concepts I otherwise would not have uncovered during a simple interview.

Third, the results of this study involved artifacts of the full-timing culture that were offered for inspection by the participants of this study. RVers were proud of the belongings that made their life enjoyable while on the road. Without prompt, an RVer was likely to abruptly jump up from a discussion and grab something that better illustrated a point that they were trying to make. For example, a common artifact full-timers were proud to display were the personalized "business cards" that they traded among other full-timers. I began a collection of these cards that became part of my data.

No conversation with an RVer was ever complete without a penny tour of their "rig." The pride with which they led this tour made declination seem like the greatest possible discomposure. During the tour I was shown modifications that made their home

more livable. Steps were often reinforced to sustain the constant usage. Mechanical devices like refrigerator motors that had the reputation for being unreliable (a strong piece of evidence for information sharing) were replaced upon purchase of the RV. While these data were crucial to my study, it was almost always offered in a way that was impossible to make record on tape. Therefore, I made an effort to collect these artifacts (e.g. business cards) or made detailed notes (e.g. description of RV equipment) within my researcher's journal.

Clarifying Researcher Bias

A researcher who becomes personally involved with research participants runs the risk of allowing biases to affect a study's outcome (Creswell, 1998). The analysis of the qualitative data was unavoidably subjective because I, as the researcher, acted as the instrument (Marshall and Rossman, 1999) and relied upon my intuitive and analytical skills (Creswell, 1998) to understand the data.

Some researchers may have a personal stake or some emotional investment in the particular outcome of a study. For instance, a researcher who has positive personal experience with *midnight basketball* and then wishes to study the effects of *midnight basketball* on participants may be predisposed to positive findings. The likelihood of my own biases having much effect on this study was not likely because I had little emotional investment. However, I realized that I may have had preconceived notions about meanings of terminology and the themes within the coding. I have an inherent interest in finding a congruent relationship in the data that was offered by the study participants. To safeguard against my possible erroneous observations and interpretations I included the help of an external auditor.

External Audits

To offer greater verification to the coding of data, a third party with no pre-existing knowledge of the details of this study was asked to read all transcripts in their entirety. They were then asked to check all micro and macrocodes that I had accumulated. The examination of codes by a third party with no prior knowledge or involvement in the study lessened the possibility of erroneous concepts being observed due to pre-conceived notions I may have had about the interviewees or full-timing. A separate pair of eyes lessened the likelihood of (a) my own biases affecting the analysis of data, (b) erroneous assumptions being made about what I had observed, (c) and misinterpretation of the terminology used by participants. The final caution may have been the most important within this study. As I mentioned in the final paragraph of *Paradigm/Method Choice*, I sought RVers with diverse backgrounds and geographical locations. This fact invariably resulted in people using language in a variety of ways and contexts. This fact increased the risk that I may have misinterpreted the use of some term. An audit by a third party offered one more layer of review to avoid this misdirection.

Negative Case Analysis

I used negative case analysis as a means of accounting for as many concepts as possible that were revealed within my data. This technique has been compared to the statistical tests of quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The goal of a negative case analysis is to account for *all* concepts that arise within the research data and leave no concept unexplained without exception. In other words, all concepts, including outliers,

will be accounted for by constant revision of working hypotheses to include all emergent theories (Creswell 1998; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) pointed out that negative case analysis like statistical testing should probably have a minimum rate of acceptable error: "perhaps the insistence on *zero* exceptions may be too rigid a criterion" (p. 312). They also pointed out that finding no exceptions (unexplainable outliers) within an entire set of data is hard to believe. With the understanding that I could not realistically account for every single concept that was offered by my sample, I accepted a few instances of unexplainable concepts. These unexplainable concepts were noted and included within my results as *outliers*.

Member Checks

The inherent transience of full-time RVers presented many difficulties when considering the use of member checks as an option for review of their transcript. Though I did not count on compliance with member-checks, I did offer the option to all participants. However, the method of offering member checks was logistically challenging.

Full-timers by-and-large used email only sporadically. Those full-timers who did have email had no interest in downloading a file, reading it, and returning corrections. They explained that the process seemed complicated and unnecessary. Snail-mail was not reliable for many reasons. Full-timers often relied on family members to collect mail for several weeks or months at a time. Other full-timers paid for mail services to collect their mail that was forwarded to campgrounds they planned to visit. Contact via snail-mail would have been an overly-delayed process.

The difficulty in contacting full-timers, via mail or email, was consistent with the ultimate findings of this study. They wanted communication on their terms. Full-timers were always happy to speak with me for the moment but balked at anything that required them to be accessible at a later date or might have impinged upon their freedom. Their interest in participation was only to the point that they were not required to be involved beyond our initial meeting. Though a lack of member-checks presented an unavoidable weakness within this study, to force the issue with full-timers would have betrayed the very nature of their appreciation for independence and freedom from obligation.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how retirees develop community within the culture of full-time RVing. Previous studies including full-timers recommended that the culture of RVers were not receptive to impersonal qualitative research techniques. Therefore, I conducted this study within the interpretive paradigm using symbolic interactionism as the guiding framework. I used theoretical sampling techniques to seek full-time RVers who appeared capable of articulating their perception of how community is defined.

I gathered data with sixteen full-time RVers via taped in-depth interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes. All data were transcribed and coded using open and axial coding. To assure the validity of my data, I used the following data verification techniques: triangulation, clarifying researcher bias, external audits, and negative case analysis.

CHAPTER IV

Analysis and Interpretation

The data that contributed to the outcome of this study were taken from three sources. First, I gathered notes from informal conversations that I had with people I met at the campgrounds where I conducted this study. This data was annotated in my researcher journal. Second, I took notes on the physical layout of campgrounds including facilities and features. This data was also annotated in my researcher journal. Finally, I recorded verbatim formal interviews with sixteen full-time RVers who agreed to participate in this study. All interviewees were either fully retired or worked only seasonal/part-time work. All interviewees verified that they were over the age of fifty-five. Of the sixteen interviewees, twelve were married and traveling with their spouse, two were divorced and traveling alone, and two were single and traveling alone.

Informal Conversations

My data collection began informally during my preliminary walk through in an RV campground. I spent a great deal of time walking inside campgrounds looking for people with whom I might speak about full-timing. Sometimes I found a full-timer to interview; often times I did not. Regardless, I observed and documented within my researcher journal data regarding the physical layout and attributes of the campgrounds in which I conducted this study. I also had many conversations owners and/or employees of the campgrounds. These individuals, though not full-timers themselves, offered a lot of

information about the culture of full-timing. Conversations with these people gave me ideas for topics to explore with full-timers during formal interviews and pointed me in the right direction for finding full-timers.

Through informal conversations, people at the campgrounds told me when I could expect full-timers to begin visiting en-mass. They explained that many campgrounds in North America are season-dependent. The Midwest, in particular, experiences an upsurge in attendance very early in the spring when the so-called snowbirds begin leaving their wintering grounds in the South and Southwest US for the North during the summer season.

Many of the campground staff mentioned the existence of RV camper clubs that are geared towards special interests (e.g. clubs for single women, Airstream users, and regional clubs). However, I did not actually speak to anyone that belonged to such a club. The fact that so many people mentioned this during informal conversation leads me to believe that membership in these clubs is fairly common, though I cannot say for sure. The information that I received on camper clubs was purely second hand and is useful only so far as to provide a good idea for future research.

Campgrounds

I conducted my study within two campgrounds within the American Midwest. Both campgrounds were located along major arteries of travel. My interviews were conducted evenly between these campgrounds.

During my walks through both RV campgrounds, I took detailed notes of the facilities. The following commonalities were shared between both campgrounds where I conducted this study.

Campgrounds were laid out in a grid of paved driveways. Along these driveways, concrete pads, designated for parking RVs, were spaced approximately 20ft apart. These pads were approximately 10ft wide by 30 feet long and were nearly perfectly level. A 3ft high wooden post was located at each pad that displayed a locater number (much like an address) as well as provided electrical and sometimes cable television access. Approximately one-third of the concrete pads had a fresh water dispenser and grey-water (sink waste water) disposal pipe located in the ground. Manicured grass with few trees existed between and around pads. At the fore of each campground, near the entrance/exit, was the black-water (sewage) dumping station. Each black-water dump station was a simple concave (to allow for drainage) concrete pad with a black-water receptacle pipe in the ground. To one side of this pad was a water hose to clean off equipment.

Each campground had special features or facilities that served as attractions. The following features were located at one or both of the campgrounds: Olympic size swimming pool with large deck and picnic area, steakhouse and tavern, large banquet hall, outdoor party gazebo approximately 100ft by 150ft., tennis courts, bad mitten court, covered picnic/barbeque area, computer terminals, and a grocery/convenience store.

Formal Interview Data

My formal data were collected during the taped interview. Interviewees used two major themes to describe the community of full-time RVers. First, interviewees used the concept of *Relationships* to explain the contact they had with other full-timers, as well as people from their previous home. Second, all interviewees referred to their community in terms of *Freedom* and life without obligation. Nine sub-themes fell under either of the

two major themes: *Instant Friendships, More Familiar than Neighbors, Sharing Information, Keeping in Touch, Surface Relationships, Mobility, Simplicity, Autonomy,* and *Hominess.* These sub-themes explain more precisely the meaning of the major themes.

Some of the data I gathered did not fit within the results of this study. Through negative case analysis I categorized as many concepts as possible that arose from my data under an explanation given within the results. Ideally, every concept that arose should be accounted for. However, like statistical testing, there had to be an acceptable rate of error for practical reasons. I have included the concepts that I could not sufficiently explain within the category of *outliers.* By following this process I offer the greatest amount of transparency to my study while providing leads for future study to those researchers who are interested.

Relationships

The first major theme to emerge from the data addressed relationships. Interviewees stressed the importance of contact they had with other full-timers and the people from their previous stationary home life. Interviewees explained that they benefited from communication in which fellow full-timers shared and passed along important details about life and traveling on the road. These details often made interviewee's lives easier and safer. An important detail might be the quality and hospitality of a campground. Sal Paradise describes this:

> See, I'd recommend this campground to anybody. This is a nice campground and I've stayed in a few where there is no way in the world I'd ever recommend it. That's the one thing about the RVing group they're not afraid to tell one another. And the people who run campgrounds should realize this, because if they've got a lousy campground and they don't care for their customers, they are not going to do any business.

Far from reclusive, interviewees spent a great deal of time chatting and sharing stories and information. Full-timers communicated regularly and passed information along an RVer "grape-vine". This communication was regarded as effective at relaying important things to know for RVers.

Instant Friendships. Within the theme of *Relationships*, there were five sub-themes. The first sub-theme was *Instant Friendships*. Interviewees were unanimous in a positive attitude about fellow full-timers. Virtually all interactions with other full-timers were described as pleasant experiences. Remi described her interactions with other full timers: "We've never had an unpleasant experience with an RVer. They're good guys, good guys and gals."

The consistent positive fellowship that interviewees experienced made full-timing a very social lifestyle. The interviewees generally expected other full-timers to be interested in friendly conversation. Babe explains that, "If you are sitting outside, you have got a welcome mat. Your welcome mat is out. Open!"

Full-timers found that certain techniques or customs made meeting people within the campground very easy. Conversations most commonly began with a reference to one's license plates. License plates were a good point of reference that offered interviewees the opportunity to relate to another full-timer. I admit that license plates were one of my most important indicators for identifying a full-timer, as well as my interjection when approaching those RVers. Ponzo explained how license plates are used to begin conversations with other full-timers:

> Interviewer: What are your interactions like with other full-timers in a campground? I know that is a general question, and I'll leave it up to you to interpret. Ponzo: You ask them where they are from, like if you see they have

Illinois plates, you ask what part of Illinois they are from. That's how you talk to them. You find out what state they are from, and then you just strike up a conversation.

Ray also described the ease in which full-timers begin conversations with one

another by making reference to the license plate:

I have to think that 80-90 percent of the people stop and say hi and before you know it you are talking and they see your license plates and they see you are from Texas, and they want to know what part of Texas you are from.

Carlo explained that he could often identify another full-timer by looking at the

license plate:

Many of your full-timers will use license plates from a state that has the tax advantages. Like Montana has no sales tax, and California I believe has no sales tax. If you see a Montana or California plates you can, and they're 50 or 60 years old riding in a fairly expensive RV, you can almost declare that they are full-timers!

Dogs were discussed by full-timers in almost identical terms as license plates. A

person who walked a dog within a campground was commonly regarded as a person who

wishes to make contact with other RVers. In fact, it was a common joke among full-

timers that owning a dog was simply a ploy to meet people while at campgrounds. Terry

explained, "When you are walking your dog, the dogs come up to you and you'll pet their

dog. People are often acquainted that way. It is a way to get acquainted."

More Familiar than Neighbors. The second sub-theme within the theme of

Relationships was *More Familiar than Neighbors.* Interviewees described that they felt

they knew their fellow full-timers better than the neighbors whom they left behind during

their previous stationary lives. They explained that, although they live in constant motion

on the road, they felt more connected to their fellow full-timers than they did with their

once stationary neighbors. Babe explained her relationships with neighbors during her

stationary life:

> You know, when we had a house, we were very guilty about that. We did not know our neighbors very well. And of course, we still worked. And you had to take care of the house and you had to do things with your family and everything.

However, when asked about her interactions with other full-timers, she replied:

> Oh, we have met more people in the last month of RVing then we ever met in our neighborhood. And once a year [in their neighborhood] we had a block party that [we] sponsored. We had it in our driveway, but we did nothing social with our neighbors.

Bull Lee also explained this phenomenon by explaining "I think that probably the

friendships are better on the road because like living in the big city you never knew your

neighbors."

Sharing Information. The third sub-theme within the theme of *Relationships* was

Sharing Information. Information sharing constituted most interactions with other full-

time RVers. Interviewees described contact with other full-timers as consisting almost

entirely of information sharing. Information that full-timers frequently shared were: (a)

travel information (e.g., travel routes, destinations, road conditions), (b) equipment

suggestions (e.g., fixing appliances, leveling campers, repairing hitches), and (c)

campground information (e.g., cleanliness, price, amenities). Carlo Marx described these

conversations:

> The most common theme for me is the conversation always leads into 'where have you been' and 'where are you going?' Yes, the common ground can usually be found from "where have you been?" Most RVers that you talk to that has done it for any time at all—you've been to the same places, you've seen the same things and maybe you've met some of the same people and then 'what type of RV do you have' and 'are you satisfied with it?' Just talking about the mechanics of the RVs, that's a popular thing.

Information passed between full-timers is not regarded as simple pleasantries and is usually heeded with reverence. Interviewees explained that they often depended on this information for safe and comfortable travel. RVers often shared information about routes that might be dangerous travel for RVs, or explained a technique for repairing a piece of equipment. Dean describes how he often receives ideas for travel routes from other RVers:

> …you just have a general conversation like you do with anybody else, and then, the next morning he's gone and you're gone, you know? It's always a nice conversation. They'll tell you different things—where they've been—and you take notes and you'll give them different points about where to go and what to do and you just kind of exchange ideas. Because, a lot of times we've gone places where people have told us while we are on the way, and we'll go there and it's really planned out nice.

Not all interviewees described an importance on information sharing between individual full-timers. Victor explained that he rarely exchanged information with other full-timers in a campground. Victor continued "I can't recall that we have [exchanged information with other full-timers about campgrounds]. We might ask where they are or how they got there, but that is about it." I asked Victor how he found information on prospective campgrounds and our conversation unfolded:

> Victor: I think it was Woodall's. Interviewer: What is Woodall's? Victor: You don't know Woodall's? It is a big thick bible of RV sites in the US. And it has everything listed. Interviewer: So this is the holy-book for full-timers? Victor: Yes! And, in fact, if you go to any of the stores that cater to the full-timers, they will typically have a Woodall's.

Victor was the only interviewee that did not emphasize the importance of information sharing with other full-timers. Although Victor did not share much information *directly* with other full-timers, he did identify with other full-timers by going to the same

information sources that other full-timers do. It was also worth noting that Woodall's is a

reference that documents and rates campgrounds for full-timers, *by* full-timers.

     Keeping In-Touch. The forth sub-theme within the theme of *Relationships* was

Keeping In-Touch. All interviewees expressed an importance of communicating with

loved one's from their previous home life. This communication was described as being

an important part of their lives. Communication was generally done on a regular and

frequent basis. Mary Lou described her communication with home:

> We're sending them [family] postcards and keeping them updated on the
> computer. And our family has been [online] too. We've talked to them and
> they've been saying that they really like having postcards. They feel like they're
> living the trip with us. Of course, I'm keeping a computer log—an updated
> computer log.

Interviewees were savvy with modern communication devices and often used various

forms (e.g., cell phones, e-mail) regularly. These forms of communication were simple

enough to be used frequently without any complications while traveling. Sal Paradise

describes staying in touch with home:

> We're still hooked up with the cell phones and, you know, the old
> telephone. So we keep in touch with friends and family. Matter of fact, my wife
> contacts one of the people back home everyday practically.

Interviewees explained that communication allowed them to maintain a status quo

in regard to their relationships with home. Life on the road did not cause the

interviewees to contact the people of their previous stationary life any more or less than

before they began their travels. Hingham explained his relationships and communication

to me:

> Well, it is like anything else, you know. Good relationships will stay the
> same. And, the ones that are just acquaintances will just kinda fall by the
> wayside. I keep in contact with the people I want to stay in contact with and they
> kinda live vicariously through me and my travels. And the other people I am not

interested in, obviously I don't see them… …So other than not seeing and being with them daily, it hasn't changed much really. I guess you really learn to appreciate your relationships a little bit more, since you are not there all the time.

Communicating with home, made easy by their familiarity with technology, allowed full-timers to keep in touch on a level more or less the same as when they existed in their previous stationary life.

Surface Relationships. The fifth sub-theme within the theme of *Relationships* was *Surface Relationships*. Interviewees described relationships with other full-timers as being almost entirely superficial. Though regarded unanimously as pleasant, depth was rarely sought with fellow full-timers. Jane Lee describes meeting people on the road:

> Well, I was just thinking you don't reach a plateau of friendship with people who are only here for a day or two, but you have so much in common while they're here, or where ever you meet them… but as far as real life long relationships, if you need them then you really better make them before you hit the road. We have developed one friendship with people who are traveling like we do, but one out of all these years isn't saying too much. We don't even ask names, very rarely. Old Bull (husband) will introduce us or maybe they'll introduce themselves, but you don't need names.

Interviewees expressed a cheerful resignation to the momentary acquaintances that made up the majority of their social interaction. Interviewees enjoyed the contact with the people they meet but did not expect or desire a continuance of friendship, no matter how positive the exchange. Camille describes this resignation:

> It's a good relationship for that time, that couple of days or so and then you move on and I'm sure that they feel the same way. They have their own families and friends that you've [sic] built over the years. There's only so much time that you can really spend with people so you take that time and you spend it with people you really like. So the friends and people that you meet on the road, it's great at that time, so it's a short length thing.

Relationships with interviewee's previous home were also kept on a superficial level. It was common for interviewees to keep in frequent and regular contact with

home, though the interviewees were careful not to allow the burdens of home to impinge upon their own agendas. Carlo Marx explained that though they stayed in touch with home "nearly every day," there was an understanding that was shared:

> Our contacts at home avoid telling us things that might upset us or make us feel that we need to be home… they know there is nothing we can do about it. They don't tell us the ins-and-outs and little ditties you know, that we'd worry about every day if we were at home.

This understanding was established to maintain their freedom and autonomy from the worries of their previous home life.

Freedom

The second major theme that emerged from my data was the concept of freedom. This major theme was organized into four sub-themes: *Mobility, Simplicity, Autonomy,* and *Hominess*. Together, these sub-themes comprised an explanation in which all interviewees spoke about being free from outside obligations and influences. Full-timing offered respite from house-chores, the schedules of daily life, and the constraints of family obligations. This freedom was also relative to other forms of travel that many interviewees had tried previously (e.g. staying in hotels). Carlo Marx explained RVing succinctly: "You are as free as you choose to be."

Mobility. The first sub-theme within the theme of *Freedom* was *Mobility*. Interviewees described a need to move around and do anything but be stationary. A discussion about the interviewees' mobility usually emerged with the question: "What does RVing do for you that staying in one place does not?" I expected many different answers here (e.g., traveling with the seasons, meeting new people, or tax evasion). However, simple mobility was invariably the answer given. When asked, Mary Lou and Elmo described:

Mary Lou: It allows you to be mobile and see. It is amazing driving across this country—the difference in scenery—and we were told that across Kansas, it was pretty flat but we saw it was really pretty. It'd kind of makes you realize how different our country is. You know you have mountains, you have plains, you have farms—and not all farms are alike—they're all different. And you're kind of like, "wow!" And there's so much more… Elmo: Like you might pull off [the highway] and say, 'Oh man!' Like we saw a Peterbilt factory today as we were driving down the freeway. Mary Lou: I didn't know they built those here. You know, and things like that, so many wonderful surprises.

Full-timing was commonly an interviewee's first opportunity to travel around North America. The mobility that RVing afforded them was often a new experience compared to their previous stationary life. Hingham explained that full-timing was his first opportunity to "get out" and see the country:

Basically it is allowing me to see the US and to meet all kinds of people. Um, I pretty much like you, graduated from high school, went to college, kept going to college, worked, kept going to college, worked, kept going to college. And if I wasn't teaching when I first started teaching summer school, then I was going to school. So I really didn't have a chance to do a lot of traveling. I didn't have a chance to see a lot of places that lots of other people have seen. Growing up, my parents didn't have the means to travel and go on vacations. So this is really a new experience for me. And, it seemed like the right thing to do at the time because I had lived in the same place for probably forty something years. And, you know? It was just time to get out.

Though simple mobility, or the ability to move about the country freely is a simpler answer than I had anticipated, the answer was strong evidence for the importance of freedom within full-timers lives.

Simplicity. The second sub-theme within the theme of *Freedom* was *Simplicity*. Many interviewees explained that they had considered other options for travel. Most had even tried other ways, such as staying in hotels or renting time-shares. These forms of travel, particularly hotels, were described in pejorative terms. Interviewees described full-timing as a simpler alternative to everything else. Jane Lee remarked on Hotels:

Moving in and out of Hotels really gets to be complicated, so I just felt like I needed more things, and [Old Bull] got kind of sick of eating in restaurants—I didn't—but it was better than having to cook [in a hotel]. I enjoyed finally having a kitchen.

Conversely, interviewees described RVing as a simpler way to travel in every way. Those who did stay in hotels as a regular means of travel did not miss it, and those who did not did not wish to try it. When asked to elaborate on the simplicity of RVing, Camille and Dean responded:

Camille: It's one hundred times easier. Dean: Like staying at this place [campground] here which is beautiful and very comfortable. Just look around now. If you were flying some place, you'd stay in a hotel in the city probably. And then what would you do? You'd rent a car and you'd see maybe a few things, but you'd go back to the hotel. Well, this [campground] is just beautiful.

Autonomy. The third sub-theme within the theme of *Freedom* was *Autonomy*. Interviewees enjoyed a lifestyle where they lived by no one else's rules but their own. They made a conscious effort to live by their own agenda, minimizing outside influence on the schedules of their lives. Carlo Marx described his autonomy:

RVing is 100% relaxation. And you get away from the daily chores that you've accumulated over the years and the daily community responsibilities and you come out and you do things that is totally dictated by the way you feel. At home, you have your obligations that you have to assume and satisfy [but] on the campground we can get out here and just sit and not do one thing in the world. If you feel like doing something, do it. If you don't, do it tomorrow—or don't do it at all.

When explaining her decision to leave the stationary life for a life on the road full-timing, Terry met with some disapproval and resistance from her friends and family. She explained that, "When we were gonna do this, everyone, especially his family, said, you don't want to do that, you have got to have roots." To which she defiantly replied, "No I don't!"

Full-timers often compared their experiences with their previous working life to the lifestyle that they had adopted while full-timing. The full-timing lifestyle was often described as a relief from work and from the stationary home-life. Sal Paradise compared full-timing to his military career:

> Before, when I was in the military, you know, it was hurry from one post to the other and you're beating feet down the highway. You don't get a chance to stop and see things. Where as this way (full-timing) I might drive 500 miles in one day and I might drive 50 miles in one day. We'd be driving along and you see a sign that says, 'hey see this attraction,' and my wife and I want to see it. We'll just pull off the road and we go see it. You know where before you never had a chance to stop and smell the roses.

Sal Paradise continued on to explain that RVing in general is without obligation: "We don't have a schedule. Like I said, if you want a schedule, then you shouldn't be in an RV."

Hominess. The forth sub-theme within the theme of *Freedom* was *Hominess.* To maintain their freedom from the world outside of full-timing, interviewees expressed a particular importance in the belongings they carried with them. These objects represented more than a simple collection of things. They were important because those things were *their* things. Together, these belongings created the space that was home for the interviewees. These things were often very simple, like one's own toiletries or one's own dishes. Unanimously, and almost always without prompt, full-timers spoke of the importance of sleeping in their own bed. Victor explained his thoughts about the importance of his own belongings:

> It is so nice being able to go to sleep in your own bed at night. And having your own stuff! Taking your stuff with you, there is a lot in that. You don't have to sit in someone else's motel chair, or whatever. It's all yours. And not only that, the smells and that, they are yours… …There are some things you can't get any other way besides taking your stuff with you.

Neal described how his own belongings comforted them while on the road:

> You feel like you are at home all the time because you walk in and there it is, the same thing. I mean, it is just like being home, sleeping in the same bed. [You have] got your own bathroom, your own kitchen.

Carlo Marx related his previous experiences with hotels and having to use stuff that was not his. His explanation described how much more simple his life in an RV is compared to other modes of travel:

> [In a hotel] you've got to get all your clothes and your cosmetics and your toiletries out, and you've left all the important ones at home. Everybody does that. You don't have a comb, you don't have a razor, but in an RV you've got your food, you've got your bathroom, you've got your toiletries, anything you need you have it. You've got your own bed too. That's a major requirement because I have never slept good in a hotel or motel.

Because the personal belongings that interviewees brought with them created an atmosphere of *hominess*, full-timers were free to travel anywhere in the country and feel safe and comfortable wherever they found themselves parking.

Outliers

There were two themes that cropped up within this study that were mentioned by one or more of the interviewees but did not fit within the study's results and were too complicated to explore within the context of this study. This study is one of the first of its kind, and therefore I consciously kept the focus broad so that I would not miss some of the overarching concepts that have not yet been explored in other studies. Therefore, a few concepts arose that may, on there own, warrant further study. These concepts were *Camper Clubs* and *The Feelings of Those Left Behind*.

Camper Clubs. The first outlier that emerged from my data was the theme of *Camper Clubs*. Many of the interviewees discussed—during the formal recorded interview as well as informal conversation—the phenomenon of RVers clubs. Some of

these clubs were very general in their focus (e.g. The Good Sam Club, this study's namesake)—in which any RVer might feel comfortable joining, and some were very specific in their focus (e.g. WOW—Women On Wheels)—in which participation was less broad. It was obvious that these organizations and clubs were important within the culture of full-timing. Ponzo explained his contact with camper clubs:

> We both really enjoy meeting those people and everything. Especially these camper clubs and everything, a lot of these people are very nice people. And we have had [visit] what, a dozen in this campground this season? And you know, they are really nice people. I don't know where the bad ones are at, but they are all very good.

However, what specific purpose these clubs serve to the culture of full-timing was unclear to me. I could not sufficiently explore this topic because virtually all of the participants I spoke with were not members of any camper club. Many of the interviewees made reference to different camper clubs and even offered names of clubs that I added to my growing list. Ray explained that:

> We haven't gotten involved with those clubs yet. I know there is a Central Missouri club, they have our name. We just haven't been to any of their rallies. We just need to get in there and get involved.

Though camper clubs were mentioned by a number of interviewees, I did not feel comfortable exploring the importance of these clubs without interviewing actual club members.

The Feelings of Those Left Behind. The second outlier that emerged from my data was the theme of *The Feelings of Those Left Behind.* Many of the interviewees described the feelings of those who they left behind in their previous stationary life. However, these emotions could only be explored second-hand through the perceptions of

the interviewees. Ray explained the despondent feelings of his friends and family concerning his life on the road:

> They really regretted us leaving. And then, my good friend, we played [golf] every day. His heart is really broke. But you know, our children understand. Family, well, we hope to fly the kids down to Florida when we're gonna be there in January and February. We'll go to Disney World. So they, our friends, we'll just call them on the cell phone.

These perceptions may or may not have been accurate. However, these concepts can only be explored sufficiently by interviewing the friends and family of full-timers.

Summary

The formal interviews that I conducted within this study revealed themes that I have organized into two major areas: *Relationships* and *Freedom*. Within the theme of *Relationships* the five sub-themes of *Instant Friendships, More Familiar than Neighbors, Sharing Information, Keeping in Touch,* and *Surface Relationships* organized my data into more specific categories. The four sub-themes of *Mobility, Simplicity, Autonomy,* and *Hominess* explicitly supported the larger theme of *Freedom*. Together, these themes offered a description of community that was consistent among all the interviewees of this study.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Implications

To explore how full-time RVers define the community in which they lived, I guided my study by asking: (a) How did RVers describe the community in which they exist; (b) What were the relationships like among other full-time RVers; and (c) How did full-time RVing affect the relationships of a full-timer's previous stationary home-life? The sixteen interviewees within this study described the community of full-timing using two major themes: *Relationships* and *Freedom*. First, interviewees within this study developed techniques to preserve relationships with friends and family from their previous home-life. They also learned techniques that allowed them to establish relationships among fellow full-timers. Second, interviewees explained the importance of freedom within their lives. Through various techniques, they maintained a life free from outside influences and obligations.

All participants within this study described the benefits of living within the community of full-timing in terms of freedom. Interviewees emphasized the importance of conducting their lives free from agendas that were not their own. The emotional pull that originated with each interviewee's previous home-life was shrugged off as no longer relevant. Interviewees explained defiantly that they did not feel obligated to respond to those emotional pulls. Interviewees even described their belongings, such as their own bed, as things that enabled them to continue to travel freely and simply, without obligation or liability to people such as friends and acquaintances or places such as

hotels. The belongings of interviewees were treasured mostly for enabling full-timers to live freely while on the road. Most importantly, the interviewees' belongings symbolized their autonomy from the rest of the world.

Using freedom to describe relationships differed from previous research (Born, 1976; Counts & Counts, 1992; Hartwigsen & Null, 1990; Jobes, 1984). Counts and Counts (1992) and Jobes (1984) suggested that full-timers participated in deep relationships on the road that required a significant level of commitment. Both studies suggested also that full-timers relinquished altogether obligations that originate with their previous stationary home-life. In other words, the social obligations of full-timers' previous home-lives were merely traded for new yet similar obligations within their lives on the road.

Jobes (1984) recognized that full-timers practiced techniques that minimized obligations and annoyances from other people. However, Jobes explained more specifically that these practices were reserved only for outsiders or non-RVers. My findings on the other hand suggested that full-timers consciously minimized the obligations of relationships with all people, including fellow full-timers. The interviewees within my study described all relationships, including relationships with family, with a qualifying word or sentence about how they were able to maintain their freedom. Interviewees explained; though relationships among RVers were positive, these relationships rarely had a future beyond a few moments to a few days. Once interviewees hit the road, they understood that relationships would generally never surpass a superficial level.

My data offered a few surprises about how full-timers developed and maintained relationships on the road and with their previous stationary home-lives. Studies by Born (1976), Counts and Counts (1992), and Jobes (1984) suggested that full-timers sever bonds with the relationships from their previous home life (i.e., friends and family) and establish strong bonds among each other. Counts and Counts (1992) described the depth of those relationships among fellow full-timers as fulfilling a role of "instant family" (p. 179). The results of my study, however, differed from these studies in two distinct ways. First, interviewees described relationships that existed among other full-timers as superficial where depth was rarely sought. Deep relationships were a liability to the freedom of interviewee's lifestyle because they were seen as cumbersome and restrictive for a life on the road. Interviewees explained that there was little possibility for and little interest in deep relationships while full-timing.

Interviewees understood that maintaining deep relationships with people on the road would be contradictory to the freedom they valued. For example, if an RVer were expected to maintain a deep relationship on the road they would be bound by obligations to and schedules of other full-timers. Interviewees experienced an understanding with other RVers, where they enjoyed each other's company for as long as was convenient, then said goodbye with little regret. No interviewees described relationships with fellow full-timers that approached the depth of family, as Counts and Counts (1992) asserted. Many interviewees remarked that they do not ever ask other full-timers' names, which illustrated a technique that made the process of saying goodbye and moving on easier for them.

Second, relationships with people from home were maintained to a degree. Maintaining relationships with home did not seem to compromise an interviewee's freedom. This concept differed from the assertions of Born, (1976) Jobes (1984) and Counts and Counts (1992) that full-timers withdraw from relationships with home in order to reestablish deep relationships with other full-timers on the road. Instead, it was common among all interviewees to contact home with regular phone calls and email. The studies of Counts and Counts and Jobes suggested that full-timers' communication with their previous stationary home-lives was not only irregular but generally non-existent. Some of the interviewees of my study remarked that they contacted friends and family from their previous stationary home-life nearly every day. Interviewees did explain that staying in contact with people from their previous stationary home-life generally involved a mutual understanding that allowed interviewees to maintain their freedom. This understanding meant not sharing little ditties that might have concerned full-timers while on the road. Obligations from home were as undesirable as any other obligations that compromised freedom, regardless of where they originated. However, as long as interviewees could stay in contact while maintaining their freedom, they were happy to do so.

Staying in touch with people (i.e. friends and family) from their previous stationary home-lives did not impinge upon the freedom of interviewees because communication was made simple by technology. Interviewees expressed a competence with several forms of long distance communication that did not interfere with their autonomy or simplicity of life. Cell phones and email were convenient and allowed interviewees to contact people from their previous stationary home-lives as much or as

little as they wanted without compromising their freedom. The simplicity of modern communication techniques made this contact possible despite their nearly constant travel in their RV. Therefore, interviewees were able to maintain relationships with their previous stationary home-life—without much obligation—and in turn receive the benefits of those relationships. Due to modern communication technologies, interviewees were able to make a healthful transition into a new retirement role by which to be defined (Minkler, 1981; Ellison, 1968) however, disengaging from previous relationships was not a necessary or even desirable component of that new role (Jobes, 1984).

Though relationships among the community of RVers were described as superficial, interviewees did describe benefits to relationships with full-timers and people from their previous home. These benefits existed primarily as the information they shared. As mentioned in the analysis and interpretation section, the interviewees sought out information during conversations with other full-timers. Many full-timers made special note of this information intending to use it during their travels. Information was often something on which interviewees depended to make their lives safer and more comfortable. Information was therefore the symbol of shared values and missions among the community of full-timers.

Recognizing other full-timers within a campground and then establishing relationships quickly was valued among interviewees. The speed at which interviewees' comfort was established with other full-timers was important due to the brevity of their interactions. The relationships between interviewees and other full-timers were established remarkably quickly due to the use of common introductory techniques. Techniques such as noticing license-plates or walking the pet dog allowed interviewees to

recognize other full-timers and begin conversations so that a relationship could coalesce rapidly and fluidly. Once a relationship or *instant friendship* was established with another full-timer, they were free to exchange and enjoy the benefits of that relationship. The evidence of instant relationships among full-timers corresponds to the findings of Counts and Counts (1992). Counts and Counts suggested that fellow full-timers instantly fulfill the role of family by giving advice and sharing information. While the interviewees of my study did describe an instant friendship that was shared with fellow full-timers, they were careful to describe the boundary of those relationships by not allowing friendships to become too deep.

The benefits of interviewee's social relationships can be described as evidence of social capital. Social capital is the link between people who participate in social networks (i.e. the community of full-timers) where knowledge, ideas, and/or good will were shared (Hemingway, 1999; Putnam, 1995). For interviewees, social capital existed as the information shared between other full-timers. Social capital, shared among the community of full-timers, symbolized reciprocity and social trust. Put simply, "life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital" (Putnam, 1995 p. 65). Life becomes easier because the benefits of social capital allow people to act more effectively within their community. Inverse most types of capital (e.g. monetary), social capital increases with use and depletes when unused or fallow. In other words, the more the members of a community share social capital (knowledge, ideas, goodwill), the more social capital there is to be shared.

The necessary components of social capital: (a) trust and (b) reciprocity (Hemingway, 2001; Hemingway, 1999; Putnam, 1995), were shared within the

interviewee's relationships with other full-timers. Interviewees explained that not only did they often share necessary information about campgrounds, routes, and RV equipment (reciprocity) with fellow full-timers, that information was held in high regard and vital to safe travel (trust). Virtually all interviewees explained that the reciprocal exchange of information among full-timers was a major benefit to associating with other full-timers. More importantly, the information shared among full-timers resulted in the key outcome of social capital (Hemingway, 1999), where the interviewees were able to act more effectively within their community of full-timers.

The results of this study were also consistent with the theory of commitment. Commitment theory originated in the field of Sociology to describe the dynamics of peoples' participation within a given community. Kanter (1972; 1968) introduced commitment theory to describe people's participation in utopian and communal societies. Kanter observed that for people who willingly joined communities of a utopian nature, such as a kibbutz in Israel, or a commune in New Mexico (being polar opposites on a social-political spectrum), the result was membership to those communities was gained at a price. The price for membership within these communities was a forfeiture of one's personal identity and autonomy. In other words, a person who lived in a communal society was forced to invest in the needs of the community by relinquishing personal agendas such as participation in (outside) activities or seeking relationships outside of that community (Becker, 1960; Buchanen, 1985; Kanter, 1968; Kanter, 1972; Scherer, 1972). People's investment within a communal society did, in return, yield certain benefits. These benefits existed as social networks, social capital, and social support (Kyle & Chick, 2002; Scherer, 1972). However, these benefits were often as specific as

food, clothing, and shelter (Kanter, 1968; Kanter, 1972). Interviewees received from their community benefits in the form of shared information that was facilitated by instant friendships. However, the commitment offered to their community was more complicated than the concept presented by Kanter.

Traditional models of commitment theory have generally been applied as an all-or-nothing process that limits its use within a study (Buchanen, 1985; Kanter, 1972; Scherer, 1972). Kanter's (1968; 1972) studies of communal societies included uncommon communities (communes and kibbutzim) that required an excessive amount of commitment compared to communities that were more mainstream. The communities of kibbutzim and communes did not value personal identity and in most cases discouraged it. Therefore, members were expected to forfeit a disproportionate amount of their autonomy and personal identity.

The all-or-nothing approach of commitment theory works only when applied to communities whose expected level of commitment are extreme. The application of commitment theory becomes problematic when applied to communities who's necessary levels of commitment are more nuanced. To join the community of full-timers, interviewees were not forced to relinquish all autonomy, personal agendas, or relationships outside of their culture. In fact, personal identity and autonomy were regarded as hallmarks of the full-timing community. Therefore, rather than being committed to their community entirely or not at all, RVers within this study described life as a full-timer as a balance between the benefits of their relationships and the freedom that was so important to them.

To explain interviewee's commitment to the community of full-timers, it is more precise to consider interviewee's commitment to their community along a continuum. Interviewees described their commitment in gradations where they acted economically with their commitment to the community of full-timers. In other words, interviewees economized their commitment to their community by choosing to be parsimonious, and, in essence, they committed only as much as necessary to receive the desired benefits of their community.

Buchanan (1985) suggested that commitment theory is best described along a continuum though few studies have presented commitment in this fashion (Buchanan, 1985; Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). Buchanan offered a model that attempted to document levels of commitment and affective attachment. However, this model delineated only levels of commitment from low to high. This model did not take into account the converse relationship between how much a person commits to a community (cost) and the amount of benefits a person may accrue from a community (benefit). Without accounting for this cost versus benefit analysis, it is unclear why a person chose a specific level of commitment offered to their community.

To explain the gradations of the interviewees' commitment, I have modified commitment theory to reflect the findings that emerged from this study more accurately. The choices of interviewees were more precisely described with the concept of parsimonious commitment. This concept suggested that a zero-sum relationship existed between the amount a full-timer committed to their community and the benefits a full-timer received from their community. In other words, commitment came at the price of their freedom and autonomy. However, for their investment to their community, full-

timers received the benefits of their community in the form of shared information, trust, and camaraderie.

The interviewees were conscious of the price of their commitment (Buchanan, 1985) that drew down their freedom. Therefore, in the interest of preserving the freedom they valued, interviewees became committed to their community of full-time RVers only as much as necessary to accrue the benefits of community relationships. In other words, interviewees exercised a constant cost benefit analysis weighing the price of their commitment, which was their freedom, (Kanter, 1972) for the benefits of their community, which was social capital (Hemingway, 2001; Hemingway, 1999; Putnam, 1995).

Evidence of the parsimonious approach interviewees took to their community was also apparent in their relationships with people from their previous home life. Though virtually all interviewees described staying in touch with home on a regular and frequent basis, interviewees were parsimonious with their commitment to those relationships. Interviewees explained that unnecessary information was not shared that might complicate their life or make them feel obligated to do something in response. In essence, this understanding was established to maintain their freedom and autonomy from the worries of their previous home-lives.

It is perhaps most accurate to explain the community of interviewees as ruled by a conscious effort to seek balance or economic equilibrium regarding their participation within the community of full-timers. Interviewees did not cut their ties with home, as Jobes (1984) suggested. Nor did they throw themselves completely into the community of full-timers, as suggested by Counts and Counts (1992). Instead, they were careful to

conserve both the resources of their relationships at home and on the road, without jeopardizing or overspending the freedom that made RVing so pleasurable.

It is also interesting and counter-intuitive to note that interviewees described social capital as high within their community while depth of relationships within their networks were described as low. Evidence of strong social capital emerged in interviewees' descriptions of the importance of shared information among peers within the culture. These findings supported the importance of leisure activities as a source for the formation of social capital. Hemingway (1999) explained that social capital grows from leisure activities that foster "autonomy, trust, cooperation, and open communication" (p. 162). These components, despite shallow social relationships, all existed in abundance within the community of the sixteen full-timers who participated in this study.

The findings within this study were evidence of one specific kind of social capital (of which there are two). Gittel and Vidal (1998) explained that social capital may either bond people together who are already familiar as *bonding social capital*, or it may unite people who are yet unfamiliar with each other as *bridging social capital*. Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla (2003) explained that bridging social capital is important for establishing relationships with people who are different, originating from different communities, cultures, or socioeconomic backgrounds. However, I suggested that bridging social capital may have been the important link among full-timers where they all lived within the same community but were all (for the most part) uniformly unfamiliar with each other. Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla suggested further that a strong component of bridging social capital was building links to external assets and information

diffusion. Information sharing and diffusion was by far the strongest factor in the linking of interviewees to their fellow full-timers. The information that was shared among full-timers was both the initiating factor and basis for their relationships.

Possibly the most problematic findings for previous research on the RVing community was an inaccurate comparison of RVers to traditional nomadic cultures. Counts and Counts (1992) used the comparison of nomadism to a great extent—and Jobes (1984) to a lesser extent—in their study of full-timers. Nomadic cultures are different than the community of full-timers in this study in that nomads were people of homogeneous communities that traveled en-mass (Myres, 1941). The reasons for transience may be different among the world's nomadic cultures (e.g. grazing of livestock, following the seasons, caravanning for trade, exhaustion of farmland). However the constant among these communities was that nomads traveled together. The interviewees within this study described a community that was entirely different in that full-timers traveled individually or with a partner. Therefore, the interviewees within this study had contact (i.e. in campgrounds or on the road) with other full-timers for only brief periods of a few moments, days, or weeks, and then, quite possibly never saw those people again. I suggest that future research involving full-timers will reveal that the establishment of community among full-timers has been entirely different than that of traditional nomadic cultures.

A coherent understanding for the culture of full-time RVers must not rely on previous and outdated research involving nomadic cultures in agricultural societies. Full-timers have created their own culture of transience based on a completely different set of motivations and organized around a totally different set of values. To gain an accurate

understanding for the culture of full-timers, researchers must avoid inaccurate comparisons and instead develop a new, fresh body of knowledge that includes direct contact with the people who make up this culture.

Study Limitations

The first limitation of this study was that I did not gather enough information to present a clear understanding of the existence camper clubs. Full-timing is a culture of many subgroups of which this study only scratched the surface. The participants' descriptions of RV camper clubs are evidence of the possible importance these subgroups (mentioned in *camper clubs*) serve within the culture. However, this study did very little to identify or delineate any such sub-cultures within the culture of full-timing. To gain an accurate estimation of these clubs, researchers should use a quantitative research method that includes a larger sample than was feasible in this study.

The second limitation of this study was that the majority of this study's participants were married. The experiences of married full-timers might be very different from that of single full-timers. The fact that most participants were married might have affected the types of answers given by interviewees. People who are married may receive a significant amount of social support from each other, therefore requiring less of their community. In order for findings of future research on full-timers to be generalized, a better understanding of who exactly is full-timing must be addressed. To do so, future research should be geared towards accessing the many sub-groups and subcultures that exist within the world of RVing.

Future Research Ideas

This study was one of the first to explore the lives of full-time RVers and the community in which they live. Because I had little other research from which to build, my research was somewhat exploratory in nature. Therefore, I hope that my study results in two outcomes. First, I hope to inspire a new trend of inquiry that explores the lives and relationships of the many people who live their lives full-timing. Second, I hope that my data offer a few ideas upon which future research might build for the sake of understanding full-time RVers more precisely. To that end, the following ideas may be helpful.

Anyone who is interested in researching full-timers, or even less specifically RVers (i.e. full-timers, vacation travelers, seasonal RVers, and weekenders) will first have to find where they are. This locating challenge may not be as simple as finding a campground that welcomes RVers. RVers are a migratory group whose schedules, if influenced by anything, are affected by the seasons (i.e. snow birds). A campground may lie dormant for months with only sporadic visitations by RVers; then suddenly a wave of RVers arrive, although they will most likely be traveling individually or in pairs. What little information I did ascertain about migration patterns was purely anecdotal. By speaking with many people involved in the world of RVing, I have learned that popular summering grounds are places such as Hendersonville, NC and Sioux Falls, SD. Wintering grounds include Naples, FL, Mission, TX, and the Mecca of the full-timing community Quartzite, AZ.

To have better access to RVers for future research, I suggested that a comprehensive documentation of the migratory patterns of full-timers be compiled. Such

a compilation would be useful to anyone concerned with contacting full-timers or understanding their influence on local communities. A more scientific understanding of (a) how many full-timers are making these migrations, (b) what are the preferred routes of travel for these full-timers, (c) what are the preferred destinations, (d) and how much time do they spend at a given destination would, at least, help make accurate census counts of those who are full-timing (Edwards, 2000).

The two *outliers* within the results of this study may offer a good place to continue the research of full-timers and their community. First, in my informal discussions with both RVers (including full-timers, seasonal, and weekenders) and campground staff, I was told about several special-interest clubs with which many RVers chose to participate. Also during formal interviews, a few of the participants mentioned the existence of camper clubs.

This study did little to explore the phenomenon of camper clubs at a depth useful for understanding their importance within the culture of full-timing. Conducting this study within the interpretive paradigm involved a sample size too small to get an accurate cross-section of the camper clubs that exist in North America. A statistical study including a far larger sample size would be more effective at researching the myriad of camper clubs that might exist within the culture of full-timing. Delineating a cross-section of camper clubs and their foci (e.g. clubs for single women, Airstream users, and regional clubs to name those mentioned to me) would be a good start for selecting samples of full-timers to study at greater depth.

Researching *the feelings of those left behind* might offer an important contrast to relationships that full-timers share with other full-timers. At the onset of this study, I had

not considered the reaction of full-timers' friends (from their previous stationary lives) to their decision to leave for a life on the road. Though this concept did not fit within the context of this study, the emotional responses of friends are possibly significant to a full-timer. To get an accurate account of this, I suggest that future research include the responses of the friends and families whom full-timers have left behind. Conducting a study with this broad scope would be logistically difficult. However, these data could offer some important insight into the factors that influence a person who has decided to become a full-timer.

Researching further the idea that full-timers might be more familiar with each other than neighbors of their previous stationary lives (in the *analysis and interpretation* section) could uncover an interesting paradox. It is counter-intuitive to consider that a person could be less familiar with a stationary neighbor whom they lived next to for years compared to their familiarity with other full-timers whom they knew only a few days at a time. However, this idea might be an exaggeration or dysphemism. In other words, the interviewees of this study might have said this simply to illustrate a point and not meant it literally. A study comparing relationships with full-timers on the road and friends from the previous stationary lives might confirm or disconfirm this concept.

Research and Practice

So that full-time RVers do not become a culture marginalized from access to traditional recreational activities, research should result in practice that might benefit them. Recreation professionals may find that RV parks are a suitable place to conduct recreational programming. RV parks and campgrounds in general contain facilities much like a community center (e.g. swimming pool, open green space, kitchens, and multi-

purpose halls). However, programming may differ somewhat from a traditional community-center because full-timers may not be able to participate over an extended time period. Recreation professionals should be sensitive to full-timers' autonomy by recognizing their transience and inability to participate in extended programming. Short programs that last only a few days can reach countless full-timers in meaningful ways. The brevity of a full-timer's participation does not have to make a program any less powerful. Recreation professionals may find that adapting programs to fit the schedules of these transient folks will be well received.

Freedom, autonomy, and mobility were universally appreciated among the full-timers of this study. In some way, each full-timer I interviewed explained the importance of having the control to go wherever he or she wanted whenever she or he wanted. Recreation professionals may be able to promote the autonomy among full-timers by offering programs that promote autonomy and self-reliance. For example, recreation professionals may encourage self-reliance among full-timers by offering the opportunity to learn communication technologies. The interviewees emphasized the importance of communication among their peers and family. Though full-timers described mostly superficial relationships with other full-timers with whom they camped, interviewees explained that it was common to keep in-touch regularly with friends and family while on the road. The latest technologies in communication allowed this. The full-timers of this study expressed mixed levels of competency with technologies that make communication easy or feasible while on the road (i.e. email, cell phones). Recreation professionals may contribute to the full-timer's technological competence by offering programs that introduce and sharpen skills with communication technologies such as: (a) using

email/internet while on the road, (b) how to have mail forwarded to future destinations, (c) map reading and route finding.

One of the concepts mentioned most by the full-timers who participated in this study was the information they shared with each other. Reciprocal information sharing was not only important logistically for an interviewee's safe and enjoyable travels but served as a source for the building of community and social capital. Recreation professionals can foster information sharing by offering programs that allow full-timers to share what they know with other full-timers. For example, recreation professionals could host opportunities at RV campgrounds in which full-timers make presentations to other full-timers on topics that matter to them (e.g. route finding, places of interest, equipment and technology).

Whichever programming strategies recreation professionals choose to serve the community of full-timers, I suggest that development of personal autonomy be a major outcome. By offering programs that promote the autonomy of full-timers, recreation professionals will enable full-timers to enjoy a lifestyle that includes all the best aspects of leisure.

Summary

Full-timers are a culture that have not yet received their due recognition. I hope that with this study I may begin a trend of inquiry that may begin to uncover and offer understanding of the people who spend their lives exploring the highways in their home on wheels. The full-timers within this study have explained a culture in which belonging to a new community of full-timers while maintaining old relationships is a matter of balance. These full-timers have developed and learned techniques so they could help

each other look bravely to the road ahead while maintaining past relationships and all the while preserving a lifestyle where they are as free as they choose to be. Future researchers will find a group of people that may be difficult to contact but among the most content and ready to share.

APPENDIX A

Interview Question Guide

1. What made you want to spend this time in your life traveling in an RV?

2. How do you identify other full-timers?

(probe) On the road? In a campground?

3. How might another full-timer identify you?

4. What does RVing do for you that staying in one place would not?

5. How does traveling affect your relationships with others?

(probe) Family/Previous Friends/Colleagues

6. Tell me what it is like when you pull into a new campground.

7. What are your interactions like with other full-timers in a campground?

8. Do you keep in touch with other full-timers?

(probe) What are the common ways you stay in touch?

9. How does staying in touch with other full-timers affect you and your travels?

10. Do you stay in touch with people from home, or your previous stationary

home? (Probe) What are the common ways that you stay in touch?

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