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Won't You Be My Neighbor

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## **Introduction**

The dictionary defines *identity* as the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. While this definition does well to articulate what an identity is made of, it fails to mention the multifaceted nature of identity. Identity is comprised of different qualities, beliefs, personalities and/or expressions that when added together make a person who they are. However, the variety of identity does not end there. Through the creation of a social and personal identity scale by Nario-Redmond, Biernat, Eidelman, and Palenske (2006) the complexities of identity beyond the individual can be better understood. Nario-Redmond, et. al (2006) understand identity as segmented into two parts that make up the whole of an individual's identity, those two parts being social and personal identity. Personal identity, the type of identity that is usually thought of, can be defined as "the interpersonal level of self which differentiates the individual as unique from others" (Nario-Redmond, et. al, n.p., 2006). That is to say that one's personal identity is the ways in which one views themselves as an individual uninfluenced by others. Reflexively, social identity is defined as the "level of self whereby the individual is identified by his or her group membership" (Nario-Redmond, et. al, n.p., 2006).

The combination of these two components of identity are important as they shape the ways in which individuals operate in the world. From how individuals interact with others to who they chose to interact with, from the profession's individuals pursue to the views they hold; identity dictates many aspects of peoples' lives. Since this multi-layered identity affects how particular individuals operate in the world it would make sense that the individual has agency over its construction, however that is not always the case. According to Tajfel and Turner (2004) identity is often times influenced by external perceptions. "Patterns of [external] prejudices and discrimination" function to alter the way individuals perceive themselves (Tajfel and Turner, p.276 ,2004). This alteration of identity through external means generally has the most influence over social identity opposed to personal identity. The potential transformative nature of what other people think can be seen in the Hill District community of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Hill District is regularly perceived in a negative light throughout the greater Pittsburgh area. This may be due to that fact that community leaders' voices are "dampened or dismissed entirely on

matters of how their community will be developed” (Holbrook, p5, 2018). While this lack of representation is an issue for another paper, it still has relevance to the topic of this paper because Hill district residents are not awarded the chance to counter negative perceptions others may have of them. After some time, these unchecked negative perceptions manifest themselves in peculiar ways. For example, the Hill District has less property crime, drug crime and violent crime than a close by Pittsburgh Neighborhood, the South Side Flats (Deluca, 2015). Nevertheless, the majority of Duquesne University students choose to live in the South Side Flats, and avoid the Hill District despite that it is statistically safer. Presumably this is because of their negative perceptions of it.

The fact that these negative external perceptions of the Hill District have the potential to become personal attitudes for community members leads to the following question: how do personal attitudes and presumed external perceptions of one’s community affect that same individual’s communal and personal identity? It was hypothesized that there would be a correlation between presumed external perceptions and communal identity. As well as a correlation between personal attitudes and personal identity. The direction of the correlation at the onset of this research remained to be seen as these variables could have interacted with each other in dynamic ways. Studies have shown how discriminatory practices and beliefs directed towards a neighborhood make members of that neighborhood less likely to identify with it (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira, 2016). However, the opposite effect is a real possibility as well. Negative perceptions and actions against a neighborhood or community can make their bond stronger as they have to lean on each other for support.

## **Methods**

With the help of previous studies and surveys (Bennet, 2006) (Riina, Martin, Gardner and Brooks-Gunn, 2012) that aimed to uncover the factors that affect identity formation, a 48 question survey was specifically constructed for Hill District residents. The survey had four sections: (1) personal attitudes, (2) presumed external perceptions, (3) communal identity and (4) personal identity. The section on *personal attitudes* aimed to understand how participants (Hill District residents) perceived their

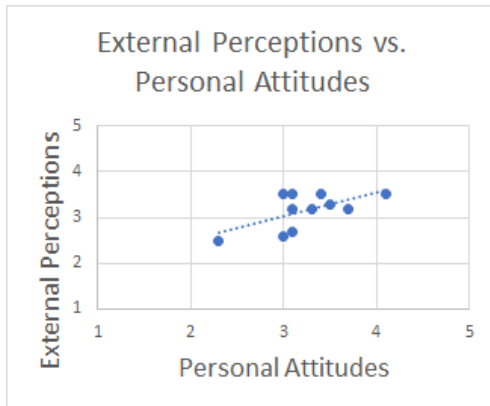
neighborhood (e.g. I spend time in public places within the Hill District). The section on *presumed external perceptions* measured how participants thought people outside of the Hill District perceived their neighborhood (e.g. People outside of the Hill District believe our streets are well maintained). The section on *communal identity* asked questions that were meant to uncover participants sense of identity as it related to their membership within the Hill District community (e.g. when I have a problem, I can talk about it with members of the community). The *personal identity* section asked questions about how participants viewed their own identity (e.g. I have difficulties communicating openly in close relationships).

The majority of the questions (47 out of 48) in the survey were presented in Likert format (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The one question that did not follow this structure was in binary format (yes or no). In order to measure and compare responses to questions, numeric values were assigned to each response. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, strongly disagree was a 1, somewhat disagree was a 2, neither agree nor disagree was a 3, somewhat agree was a 4 and strongly agree was a 5. For the few questions that followed the strongly disagree to strongly agree question structure but were negatively constructed in sentence formation (e.g. I am uncomfortable when I have to meet new people) the 5-point scale was reverse coded. This is to say that if a participant somewhat agreed with the aforementioned question their response would be coded as 2 instead of 4.

## **Results**

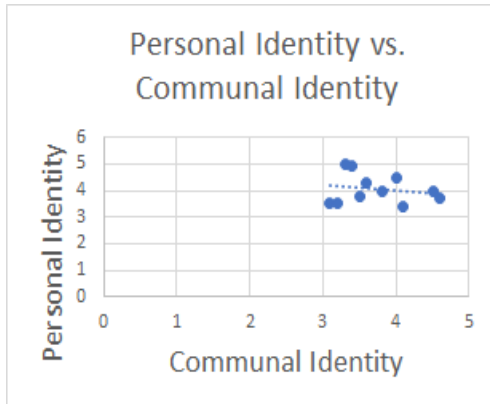
The following graphs that will be presented are scatter plots. Scatter plots are intended to visually communicate potential correlations between any two variables. It is important to note that each data point on the following scatter plots represent each individual participant's average score on each of the four sections of the survey. The sample size for this survey was 11.

Graph 1



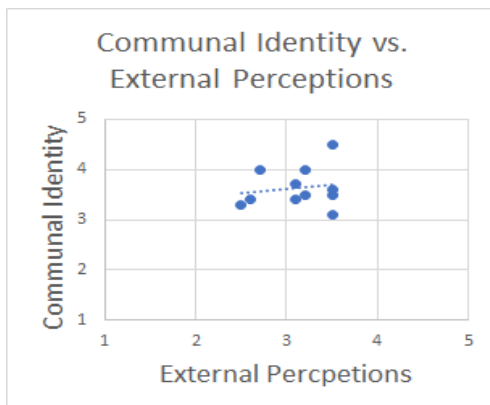
Graph 1 suggests a positive correlation between presumed external perceptions and personal attitudes of the Hill district. That is to say that higher scores on the personal attitudes section predicted higher scores on the external perceptions survey section and vice versa.

Graph 2



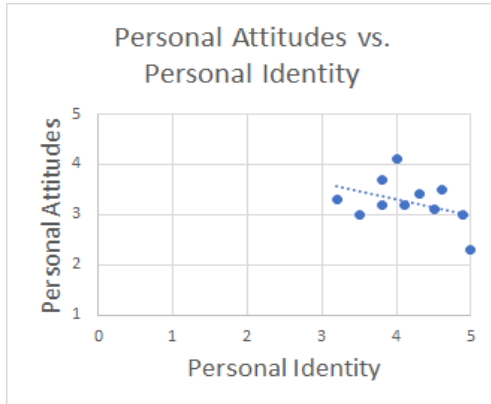
Graph 2 portrays a negligible negative correlation between personal and communal identity.

Graph 3



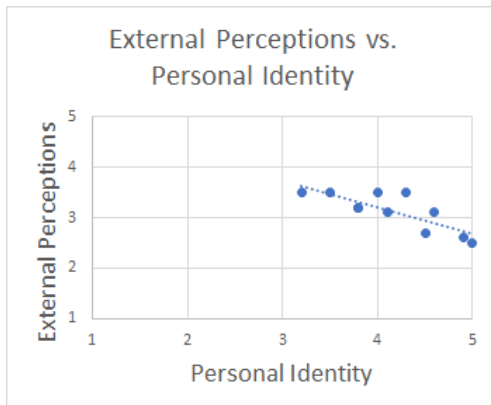
Graph 3 depicts a negligible positive correlation between communal identity and presumed external perceptions.

Graph 4



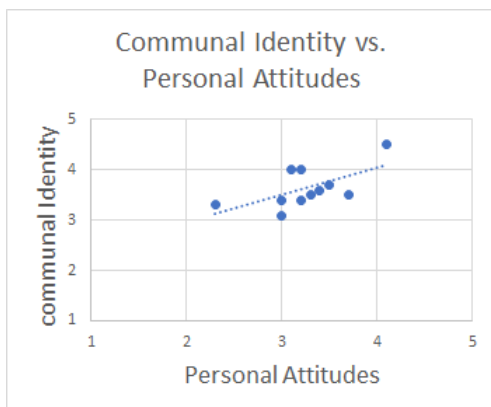
Graph 4 suggests a negative correlation between personal attitudes of the Hill District and personal identity. In other words, lower personal attitudes of the Hill District predict higher levels of personal identity and vice versa.

Graph 5



Graph 5 suggests a negative correlation between perceived external attitudes and personal identity. That is, lower presumed external perceptions (i.e., more negative attitudes by outsiders) predicted higher personal identity scores among Hill residents.

Graph 6



Graph 6 suggests a positive correlation between community identity and personal attitudes. That is, higher communal identity scores predict higher personal attitudes among Hill District residents.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to uncover how external perceptions, personal attitudes, communal identity and personal identity all relate to one another in the Hill District community. It was hypothesized that there would be some correlation between these variables, and as expected, there was. The graphs that best illustrate these findings are graphs 1, 4, 5 and 6.

As was mentioned in the *results* section graph 1 shows a positive correlation between presumed external perceptions and personal attitudes of the Hill district. This finding was interesting as it pointed out the fact that participants in this study believed people outside of their neighborhood saw their community in a similar way to how they viewed it. If a participant viewed the Hill District in a negative light they were likely to conclude others viewed it poorly as well.

The negative correlation graph 4 illustrated between personal attitudes and personal identity is telling, as it alludes to the fact that participants who viewed their neighborhood (Hill District) negatively were likely to have high scores for personal identity. This also means that the inverse is true: when participants viewed the Hill District in a positive light they were less likely to positively construct their identity in a personal way. Graph 5 presents similar a correlation to graph 4 however the variables being measured were presumed external perceptions and personal identity rather than personal attitudes and personal identity. Nevertheless, low presumed external perceptions were generally paired with high levels of personal identity and vice versa. Finally graph 6 demonstrates how there is relatively strong correlation between personal attitudes of the Hill District and communal identity. If participants viewed their neighborhood in a positive light they were more likely to attribute their membership to the Hill District community as an active part of their identity.

When these four graphs (1, 4, 5 and 6) are considered together, a potential understanding of how the variables of this study relate to one another can be seen. It appears that participants were more likely to construct their identity in a personal way and dissociate themselves with their community when they believed outsiders viewed their neighborhood poorly. What's more is the fact that presumed external



attitudes and personal attitudes were positively correlated (graph 1). This is to say that presumed negative perceptions of the Hill District seem to be internalized, to a degree, by members of the community.

The results of this study provide some valuable insights into the effects that external perceptions of the Hill District have on members of the community and their construction of personal and communal identity. Respondents of the survey seemed to prioritize personal construction of identity over communal construction all the while believing negative ideas of the Hill district, both for themselves and others.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One of the acknowledged limitations of this study was the low number of participants that completed the survey (n=11). For a more comprehensive understanding of the relations between presumed external perceptions, personal attitudes, communal identity and personal identity, the survey must reach a greater population of Hill District community members. The main strength of this study was the construction of the questions of the survey and the seeming correlations that were uncovered. More extensive research should be conducted while keeping these strengths and limitations in mind to expand upon the findings of this study.

### **Further Research Opportunities**

In April of 2019, the historical social service agency of the Hill District, The Hill House Association, was forced into bankruptcy liquidation. The Hill House has been providing services including those for seniors, wellness clinics, child care, and more. The Hill House building shared Centre Avenue with other community resources as well, such as the only grocery store in the Hill District. Unfortunately, however, the Hill District Shop N' Save shut down on March 20 of 2019. The foreclosure of two community resources within two months of each other is startling. Availability of resources can hinder our physical and mental health. The data from the survey in this study had been collected prior to these events. Nevertheless, respondents tended to have higher personal identity scores than communal identity stores. Now, with the closure of these two social amenities that fostered social cohesion, one can

only imagine the negative effects the already low communal identity of the Hill District will receive.

Those participants whose personal identity scores were higher than their communal identity scores could now report even greater differences between the two after the foreclosure of these Hill District's social amenities. Further research should be conducted to uncover the role that social amenities play in the construction of identity in the Hill District.

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