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(Corresponding author: Clay Spinuzzi.)

C. Spinuzzi, A. Booth, D. Gossi, and T. B. Hooker are with the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, 78712 USA (emails: Clay.Spinuzzi@utexas.edu; andrew.booth@utexas.edu; draketg@utexas.edu; TristinHooker@utexas.edu).

M. Scott is with the Department of English, Rocky Mountain College, Billings, MT 59102 USA (email: maclain.scott@rocky.edu).

N. O’Hearn is with the Department of English, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, 78712 USA (email: ohearn@utexas.edu).

Research Article

“The City Residents Do Not Get Involved”: Understanding Barriers to Community Participation in a Small Texas Boomtown

— CLAY SPINUZZI (0000-0002-9629-6189), ANDREW BOOTH (0009-0001-7673-1171), MACLAIN SCOTT (0009-0002-8703-108X), DRAKE GOSSI (0000-0002-3530-9599), TRISTIN BRYNN HOOKER (0000-0002-9339-1009), AND NIGEL O’HEARN (0009-0005-5104-3363) .

Abstract—Background: *Professional communication researchers have engaged communities through community research and interventions such as town halls, charettes,*

and participatory design work. Such interventions rely on community members being willing to get involved, voicing their perspectives, and engaging in productive dialogue. Yet some communities do not have these precursor conditions for intervention: they face significant social barriers that make such interventions unlikely to succeed. In an interview- and document-based study, we examine the social barriers described by interviewees in “Permia,” a small town in the Texas Permian Basin region. In contrast to the five other communities we studied, Permia participants demonstrate little readiness to engage in community dialogue. We explore how Permia interviewees made sense of unwillingness to participate in its public life, how their understandings contrasted with the other communities we investigated, and how this research might guide professional communicators as they plan future community-based interventions.

Literature review: *We review the professional communication research on community interventions as well as relevant sociological literature on boomtowns.*

Research questions: *1. How do community leaders understand their community heritage as constraining or enabling development? 2. Where do community leaders and members see potential for change and growth in community development? Where do they see barriers, threats, and hard choices? 3. How do community leaders describe the relations among community development stakeholders? How do they describe expectations and trust among them on interpersonal, inter-group, and inter-organizational levels?*

Research methodology: *We collected documents and statistics about six small Texas towns, then interviewed community leaders about the towns’ advantages and challenges. Based on those interviews, we collected further documents. We analyzed the data using deductive and inductive coding, as well as narrative analysis.*

Results/Discussion: *Through coding, we determined that interviewees saw Permia’s residents as being unwilling to engage in*

*deliberations in traditional forums such as city council meetings, and that their explanations for this unwillingness fell into three categories of barriers: distrust of institutions, dwindling personal ties, and lack of moral expectations for residents to engage in community dialogue. These three categories contrast with the other communities we studied. Through narrative analysis, we identify stories that the interviewees tell to explain how these barriers developed in Permia. **Conclusions:** We conclude by discussing how professional communicators might survey barriers to community dialogue. Such surveys can help professional communicators to choose a pathway for intervention in their community projects.*

The city residents do not get involved in city councils or commissioners or anything like that, you know. They'd just rather just stay at it, and moan and groan.

These words were uttered by “Andrea,” a community leader in “Permia” (both names are pseudonyms). Permia is a rural community in West Texas that began as a tent city, first supporting local ranches, then the burgeoning oil and gas industry in the Permian Basin. It is a boomtown, with all the drawbacks that name brings: By one estimate, 25% of Permia’s residents are temporary, and until recently, this 6,400-person community had over 100 RV parks. The town finally instituted zoning regulations in 2021, and interviewees were hopeful that these would “clean up” the town. When asked about their vision for the future, residents suggested modest goals such as opening a second grocery store.

We approached leaders in Permia as part of a six-community exploratory research study sponsored by the IC² Institute, whose goal is “to measure, define, and create a *well-being economy* that prioritizes sustainability and the equitable allocation of resources” [1]. IC² focuses on studies that “measure and eliminate systemic inequities in health care, housing,

entrepreneurial opportunity and environmental health” [2]. Our research project supported that focus by interviewing leaders in six small towns to determine how they understood their communities’ heritage, the assets and barriers to community well-being, and their communities’ stakeholders; each community was promised (and received) a report that anonymously summarized the responses, compared the community to a similar one, and presented a set of recommendations for improving community dialogue.

As we examined barriers across the communities, Permian stood out. According to Andrea and others we interviewed, Permian has had considerable difficulty in getting residents to participate in public life. Interviewees told us that most residents don’t attend town hall meetings, don’t volunteer, and don’t consider running for office. When small business owners choose to retire, they close those businesses rather than finding a buyer who can keep it going. When landowners sell their water rights, they sell to adjacent communities rather than Permian. Interviewees pointed to a variety of reasons for this low participation, including incidents of mismanagement, corruption, and incompetence in city leadership, the larger loss of community that comes from the inherent transience of a boomtown, and the lack of moral expectations for community members to participate. And they also recognized that things had not always been this way.

Another interviewee, Angela, lamented,

It’s very different than it was years back, but there was more of a sense of community, you know, now, there's just very few of the old-time people left ... it’s just so different than it used to be.... You know, they [the transient population] come here—It’s just for money. ... there's just not much community.

This situation, common in boomtowns, creates a real barrier for enacting positive change. Our recommendations for Permian were aligned with our field's body of community research, which emphasizes facilitating community deliberations.

- Develop community conversations for discussing how public, private, nonprofit, and religious institutions can set and pursue mutual goals.
- Support dialogue between residents and city government, as well as between the city and county governments.
- Continue developing plans for addressing key infrastructure issues within Permian.
- Work to foster solidarity and identity through community outreach.
- Identify Permian's values and work to incorporate more stakeholder voices in key decisions.

But rereading these recommendations is painful because we recognize that *they are predicated on the willingness of community members to participate in such conversations*—conversations that hardly seem possible given what we know about low community involvement in Permian. We were trying to build without a foundation, a fact that became obvious when we realized that one of our interviewees, Alan, had explicitly described a previous intervention failing in the town.

I was real disappointed in the attendance from the public. One of them, they came in and had all this stuff and they want you to write down and put sticky notes on it, and there might have been 30 people.

In other words, we had initially taken Permia's willingness to deliberate for granted, and, at the same time, we lacked both a concept and a measure for examining Permia's readiness for deliberation.

Similarly, we expected our sampling approach to yield a broad sample of Permia's leaders across different sectors, but we found that government and business leaders were more willing to talk to us, while we had trouble getting participation from nonprofit leaders and completely failed when approaching religious leaders. Thus, interview results from Permia come largely from the former two sectors, and—significantly—may not reflect the views of Permia's Hispanic leaders, who are underrepresented in those sectors. Permia was the only community in which we saw this discrepancy. This lack of participation might be due to COVID-19 difficulties (we conducted the research during the pandemic), Permia's institutional power structures, residents' general unwillingness to be involved, or a combination of these factors. But we consider this limitation throughout, and we discuss it more thoroughly at the end of the paper.

Here, we explore the barriers that kept Permia's residents from participating in public life and the causes that participants named as leading to these barriers. Based on our results, we consider how professional communicators engaging in community research might assess a community's readiness to engage in community dialogue. We believe that this discussion can help to guide professional communicators as they plan future community-based interventions. We also reflect on how to better engage communities more broadly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before exploring our methodology, research questions, and results, we first discuss community-based research in professional communication as well as community research on boomtowns in sociology.

Community-Based Research in Professional Communication Although researchers in professional communication have historically been interested in communication as it pertains to smaller entities, such as groups and organizations, a growing body of literature exists examining communities and public policy [3], [4], [5]. At the same time, other scholars have extended this line of inquiry to examine civic [6] and social justice concerns [7], [8].

Although research on “community” has recently grown in professional communication, the term itself is often left undefined. The term *community* is often applied in two different ways. In some research, the word is used to characterize a subset of interested parties such as immigrants [9], trans individuals using DIY hormone replacement therapy [10], grassroots entrepreneurs in India [11], people working at banks or academic institutions [12], and members of coworking sites [13]. We can also include here research that uses the term as part of activity theory analyses.

In another strand of research, “community” is used to characterize people who are united by physical geographic locations, such as a neighborhood, town, or municipal area [5], [14], [15], [16], a rural area [17], [18], [19], a nation [4], or those living in the vicinity of a specific location [15], [20], [21]. In this article, we follow the boomtown literature (see the next subsection) by applying community in the latter sense, defining Permian’s community as united by geographic location.

In professional communication, community-based research tends to examine specific community interventions such as town halls [15], public meetings [20], charettes [16], [22], and participatory

design in urban planning [16], [23], [24]. These interventionist approaches largely yield positive results. However, they tend to assume rather than verify that these communities are ready and willing to engage in deliberative conversations that support the intervention method. Members of the community might disagree, bicker, or even oppose each other, but they are assumed to be united by some sort of rhetorical common ground.

Such common ground is built, not provided, and in some geographically bound communities, there may not be enough common ground to support interventions, and the community may lack the necessary readiness to deliberate. So how do we plan interventions without sufficient common ground? This was the situation that we faced in the boomtown of Permian.

Community-based Research on Boomtowns Rural sociologists have long studied the sociological effects of boomtowns. They have examined how economic boom-bust cycles affect community identity and solidarity [25] and social well-being [26]. In a 2018 study, Schafft et al. examined how economic development in boomtowns can “paradoxically create new kinds of insecurities” and serve to exacerbate “existing poverty and economic vulnerability, even at the height of development activity” [25, p. 505]. Such insecurities often lead to complex senses of community. Foster and Taylor explored how these insecurities and the marginalized status of “shadow populations” within boomtowns affects their “inclusion within a geographically-confined community” [26, p. 169].

Others, such as Fernando and Cooley [27], used a systems framework to examine the unique socioeconomic systems that boomtowns generate and their potential disruptive effects to the local community, while Brown examined the effects of rapid economic and social change on perceptions of crime and disorder in oil and gas boomtowns in coastal Louisiana, finding that the

community integration of new workers was predicated on the community's perceptions and future projections of workers' "trust and reciprocity" and that community civic institutions functioned to reduce the impact of social disruption and increase social cohesion among residents and incoming workers [28, pp. 94-95].

Like Permian, these boomtowns rely on natural resource extraction, such as oil and gas, subjecting them to economic boom-bust cycles and a simultaneous influx and exodus of temporary workers. This thread of research has examined boomtowns' "community impact," "social impact," "social disruption," or effects of "social well-being," resulting in residents withdrawing from public life—just as Permian's residents have.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our study grew out of a larger project sponsored by the IC² Institute to examine how to encourage economic development across six rural Texas communities, specifically by examining perceived barriers to community well-being. This project was reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and declared exempt on May 6, 2021; however, the research team promised interviewees the same protections that they could expect from an IRB-supervised study, including anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time for any reason. The team also promised, and delivered, reports to each community, which summarized results by paraphrasing responses to our interview questions and contrasting them to the responses of a paired community, then recommending ways to move forward. These aggregate results and recommendations were shared with each community's participants, who were encouraged to share them with the larger community (see [29], p.152).

In this project, during summer 2021, Authors 2-6 were each assigned a rural community to investigate through document collection and interviews. We posed the following research questions for our study.

RQ1. How do community leaders understand their community heritage as constraining or enabling development?

RQ2. Where do community leaders and members see potential for change and growth in community development? Where do they see barriers, threats, and hard choices?

RQ3. How do community leaders describe the relations among community development stakeholders? How do they describe expectations and trust among them on interpersonal, inter-group, and inter-organizational levels?

This paper focuses specifically on the latter half of the second research question: *How did interviewees characterize barriers to change and growth?*

Data Collection We selected six communities. For most communities, we had “grids,” brief summaries of summer 2020 interviews generated by undergraduate students returning to their communities for the summer; for four of the six communities, these grids gave us a starting point for formal interviews, as well as an idea of community leaders’ concerns. Based on the grids and a review of basic statistics for these communities, we selected three community pairs (Table I).

- **Dominant economic base shift:** These two communities were paired because of their reliance on sand mining. “Sandville” had recently lost sand mines, which produced sand for the petroleum industry to use in fracking. “Permian,” which was closer to the oilfields, had recently gained sand mines.

- **Urban pressure:** “Rangerton” and “Xville” were both on highways leading to a major metropolitan area. Consequently, they both faced pressures, including the growth of bedroom communities and increased traffic.
- **Public-funded economic base:** These two communities’ major employers were public institutions. “Freerange” institutions included prisons, a hospital, and a school district. “Heritage” institutions included prisons, a university, and a school district.

Two of the selected communities, Permian and Rangerton, did not have grids; they were selected as analogues to other communities. Permian was selected because, like Sandville, it was undergoing a shift in its dominant economic base: sand mines were moving from Sandville, in central Texas, to West Texas communities such as Permian.

After being trained in qualitative research methods, Authors 2-6 were each assigned to a community. Authors 2-6 collected the following data.

- **Initial document collection:** Documents on the community, prominent organizations (government, businesses, nonprofits, and places of worship), and community leaders; documents related to the history, mission, and vision of these organizations.
- **Interviews:** Semistructured interviews with community leaders (see below); identify leader’s understanding of community heritage and characteristics, growth opportunities and barriers, significant stakeholders, expectations, and trust.
- **Secondary document collection:** Documents mentioned in interviews; confirmatory evidence for interview statements.

To identify *leaders*, we focused on four sectors that were common across communities:

- **Public:** City council and other elected officials or public servants.
- **Private:** Owners of prominent businesses. When possible, we made contact through the Chamber of Commerce and variations such as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Black Chamber of Commerce.
- **Nonprofit:** Leaders of nonprofit organizations such as economic development corporations (EDCs), the Chamber of Commerce (and variations such as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Black Chamber of Commerce), as well as more specialized nonprofits oriented to community needs.
- **Religious:** Leaders of churches, temples, mosques, and other institutes of organized religion.

When possible, we started with people who had been interviewed by students in 2020. We identified the nonprofit and religious sectors because we understood that minority groups might not be part of the town's power structure, and that socioeconomic status might also correlate with the official power structure in the community. Because there were no grids for Permian, Author 2 cold-called and cold-emailed people from each sector. Permian's community participation problem was reflected in the considerable difficulty we encountered in securing participants. Many potential interviewees expressed little interest in participating.

Although Permian is a majority-Hispanic community, we were unsuccessful in our efforts to secure interviews with Hispanic small business owners and government officials, as well as religious leaders of predominately Hispanic churches. Although some of this issue is perhaps

related to the lack of Hispanic representation within city government, we suspect there were two additional complications: the disruptive effects of COVID-19 and recent scandals and allegations within the community, which meant that many community members were reluctant to be interviewed. We discuss these limitations further in the Limitations section.

Across all communities, authors interviewed a total of 61 community leaders (8-13 people per community) and collected a total of 277 documents (31-60 documents per community).

Data Reduction For this paper, we focus mainly on Permian's interviews and secondarily contrast them with relevant interviews from other communities. Table II lists the subset of 18 participants quoted in this paper, including participant pseudonyms, location, and sector. Pseudonym names indicate where each participant is from. For instance, all participants from Permian were given a name that starts with A.

We further reduced data through coding (see below). Specifically, we asked participants questions about their community's heritage (history, prominent organizations and people, places, and celebrations); potential for and barriers to change and growth; and the ways that organizations and leaders relate in the town. We used starter codes to code for heritage, vision, growth, barrier, and stake. In this paper, we focus on codes related to barrier.

Data Analysis and Reduction Authors met weekly during the 12-week project to discuss coding and cross-check data (see [31], [32]). During this process, Authors 2-6 also wrote analytic memos. Based on this work, we applied two analyses.

Analysis 1: Thematic coding analysis Authors 2-6 coded interviews and artifacts as they collected them. We coded data in two passes, in accordance with a practice common in

professional communication research: “begin[ning] with categories and codes derived from prior research, then examin[ing] the data further to discover new codes that they add to the existing list” [33, p. 391].

In an initial coding pass, we used a small number of deductive starter codes [32] indexed to our interview questions and the themes that we were investigating. Starter codes included *heritage*, *vision*, *growth*, *barrier*, and *stake* (for stakeholders).

In a second coding pass, Author 1 reconciled deductive codes and developed a small number of inductive open codes (see [32], [34]) to identify recurrent themes based on the ongoing discussion. These codes mainly subdivided starter code categories, such as identifying types of barriers mentioned by participants.

For this paper, we focused on a subset of those barriers, captured in the open codes listed in Table III.

We inductively grouped these codes into three themes related to community participation:

- **Lack of institutional trust**, characterized through the codes *barrier_oldguard*, *barrier_dialogue*, and *barrier_corruption*
- **Lack of personal ties**, characterized through the codes *barrier_individualism* and *barrier_temporary_workers*
- **Lack of moral expectation for community members to participate in community life**, characterized through the code *barrier_individualism*

Analysis 2: Causal narrative analysis Once we used codes to characterize barriers to community participation, we then drew on narrative analysis [18], [35], [36], [37], [38] to identify and compare causal accounts that our interviewees offered for why residents were unwilling to participate in community life. Scholars of professional communication have long recognized narrative as an analytic framework that manifests and accounts for research subjects' lived experiences [37], [39], [40], [41], [42]. Narrative inquiry affords researchers the opportunity to identify key themes across interview data, identifying shared values, tensions, and the ways in which communities make meaning through their deliberations. It has also been used to explore boomtowns [43]. In our causality analysis, we especially focused on stories of communities' founding, history, and development.

As Boje [37] argues, stories are often fragmentary, and although stories frequently cohere across communities, sometimes they do not. Thus, we triangulated stories in the following ways.

- We compared stories with each other *within* a given community (that is, did different people in Permian tell similar stories about their community?).
- We compared stories *across* communities (that is, did people in Permian tell stories similar to those in other communities?).
- We compared stories *against* documents and statistics (that is, did these stories align with documentary evidence?).

Our goal was not to develop a single overarching narrative but to examine to what extent these causal stories cohered across interviewees. With this methodology, we produced the results described in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table I, we report decennial census self-response rates, which are often used as a proxy for social cohesion [44]. Nationally, decennial response rates were 66.5% in 2010 and 67% in 2020.

In Permian, the response rate in 2010 was 62.2%, close to the national average, but in 2020 the rate dropped precipitously to 49% (Table I). This sharp drop corresponds to opening of sand mines outside city limits, with the first sand mine opening in 2017. A year later, at least 12 sand mines were operating in the county, although the number of plants can be difficult to track given the rapid changes in the region. This indicator of low social cohesion is also borne out in our interviews and documents. Throughout our interviews, Permian's residents consistently expressed low institutional trust for local government, describing it as riddled with corruption and scandal. Members of local government, on the other hand, frequently complained that residents failed to meet their moral obligation to participate in civic affairs. Residents also pointed to environmental hazards and infrastructure issues, as well as a lack of land for development and a lack of economic diversification. Finally, long-term residents mourn what they characterize as a loss of community, pointing out how even familiar places (such as the lone grocery store) seem filled with strangers—disrupting the personal ties of the community's longer-term residents (see [45, p. 265]).

Below, we first present a brief history of Permian. Then, we discuss three characteristics of this low community participation as described by our participants: lack of trust in institutions, lack of personal ties, and lack of moral expectation for community members to participate in community life. For each characteristic, we draw on narrative analysis to examine why interviewees thought

Permia had developed it. We compare these results relative to other communities we studied, establishing that Permia faces barriers different from those of other communities.

A Brief History of Permia Permia’s history was told to us through stories by community members in interviews and then confirmed through research and additional documents.

Throughout its history, Permia’s identity has depended on oil mining. Although the town began as a supply center and “tent city” for local ranches, when oil was discovered in the 1920s the town grew quickly, but then succumbed to the boom-and-bust cycles typical of oil towns. Permia remained resilient, however, and by the 1960’s the town was the county seat, had a population of more than 10,000, and boasted a booming economy that included more than 260 businesses.

Despite the economic uncertainties that faced the town, residents seemed to have faced these uncertainties together. As Angela, one elderly resident put it, “it’s very different than it was years back, but there was more of a sense of community.” Another resident, Alan, told a story of Permia’s founding to illustrate its former sense of shared community.

[Permia] was just a tent city. You know tents, not much permanence. There was hardly any permanent [dwellings]. Well, they had an election. There was [another town in the county] had a population of 10,000. [Permia] had a population of like 400, but everyone in [Permia] showed up and voted So they had to build the county courthouse in [Permia].

Thus—according to this founding story—Permia became the county seat through a remarkable act of community engagement. Yet, unlike most of the other communities we investigated, Permia did not celebrate its founding, instead celebrating the city through a generic “Celebrate Permia Days.”

As Wuthnow argues, small towns often establish their identities (and social fabric) on their founding stories, the celebrations that are grounded in them, and the history that is propounded through them. “In collective memory, the festivals both retell and become part of that history” [46, p. 111]. Permian’s generic celebration, and the fact that most interviewees knew little of the community’s founding, points to the community’s lack of an overarching causal or origin story that might provide more coherent sense of collective history and identity.

Through its civic symbols, Permian also tells its history as an oil town. For example, in the 1970s, it relocated the last standing wooden oil pumpjack to the city square. Several residents pointed to the pumpjack as the community’s defining landmark. (Tellingly, the pumpjack blew down in a storm several years ago and the community has yet to restore it.) The city website, logo, and heritage sites in city spaces also prominently feature the city’s oil-producing past. That story is also told in present employment trends: according to census data from 2020, nearly 40% of the jobs in Permian’s county work in the mining industry [47].

In the 1980s, when the price of oil dropped to \$10 a barrel, Permian’s population also dropped, and the city began to decline. In 2017, the fracking revolution ushered in another boom cycle, both for oil production and for sand plants to supply sand for hydraulic fracturing. These plants moved from central Texas (including Sandville) to be closer to fracking operations and cut costs. Since 2017, 20 sand plants have begun operating in the region, with as many as 12 of the plants operating just outside Permian. *Outside* is an important qualifier because the town cannot collect taxes outside its city limits.

Characteristics of Low Community Participation and Their Causes Through our thematic coding, we identified three broad themes characterizing the barriers to Permian's low community participation.

- **Lack of trust in institutions:** Residents expressed institutional distrust, telling stories of Permian being mismanaged, with city leadership failing to engage the community—and their stories included scandals and incompetence in these institutions, a lack of economic diversification, and fundamental failures on to address city infrastructure issues.
- **Lack of personal ties:** Five of the interviewees lamented the loss of community solidarity in Permian that came with the boom, which had brought uninvested strangers to live temporarily in their community.
- **Lack of moral expectation to participate in community life:** Finally, city leaders generally saw residents as unresponsive and as refusing to participate in civic affairs.

In contrast to our other communities, interviewees rarely went beyond complaining to providing potential solutions to these problems, compromises, or opportunities for deliberation. However, they told many causal stories about how these problems had come about. Below, we describe these themes and provide a brief narrative analysis of their causes, as told to us by interviewees.

Lack of trust in institutions In our thematic analysis, we found that interviewees told many stories of institutions riddled with favoritism, corruption, and incompetence. For some time, Permian's leadership has been plagued by scandals and mismanagement. The previous city manager had been forced to resign over improprieties, and the current city manager was

perceived by many as too inexperienced. The Chamber of Commerce was on hiatus due to yet another scandal. And just as we were finishing our interviews, the police chief was indicted.

Interviews frequently included stories emphasizing low levels of institutional trust residents have with city government: Alicia likened the city government to a cartel, while Angela argued that because of incompetent city managers, “our town has sort of really just gone down.”

Unfortunately, documentary evidence of these incidents is scarce: Permia’s chief sources of news were its Facebook page and the local paper, which is more like a newsletter. Both shut down at the end of 2021.

To examine how Permia lost its trust in institutions, we turned to narrative analysis. Andrea told a story of institutional corruption.

Right now, we're in the process of getting a new Chamber [of Commerce] because we had some, uh, issues. But before then, you know, they would hold, like, events for the community like movie night, or they're the ones that did our Fourth of July fireworks. They have a lot of cookouts. Just mainly a lot of events during holidays and a lot, you know, even there for a while they were holding Thanksgiving dinner for the city, and it was, you know, usually, the week of Thanksgiving or the weekend before. They just made sure that the city was, the people of Permia was taken care of, and anybody could pretty much show up to anything.

Later in the interview, Andrea states that these “issues” involved “a legal situation.” Other interviewees (Alan, Arthur, and Andy) also alluded to this situation. Andy characterized the Chamber’s issues as part of a larger trend of declining community institutions such as the Rotary Club and the Lion’s Club. “A lot of it is pretty much died down and gone to the side. If you go

back and look and see how those organizations played a part in the community thirty or forty years ago.”

Alicia, who is relatively new to Permian, alluded to institutional corruption she had encountered in setting up her business, especially how generational wealth created winners and losers.

Because we hear rumors of, you know, disadvantaged or other families back in the day, that owned a lot of this land, and somehow lost ... how did this land, this vastness become yours and your family generationally?

In total, six of the eight participants described corruption, incompetence, and scandals across Permian's institutions, and offered causal stories about these incidents.

Lack of personal ties Interviewees also characterized Permian as lacking personal ties. Andrea described the fraying personal ties in Permian, which she associated with temporary workers.

You have people that come in, and is rude to local people, but then you'd have your out-of-towners that come in, and we're the rude people kind of don't know how to explain that, it's just really different. It was really different. It was just really different for all of us, I believe, because you have those that come in and don't understand. Or I guess maybe our locals had certain things that we do and set up and then you have your people coming in and that don't understand our—I don't know how to explain that ... our way of life

As a boomtown, Permian had to deal with periodic influxes of temporary workers, who were not members of the community and largely did not seek to integrate into it. As Alan put it, “It's like a yo-yo.... our population two years ago was probably sitting at about 19-20,000. But it was all

in RVs. Okay, they're here working jobs, finish up, and then they're, they're gone." (The census claims that Permian had a population of about 6,400 that year.) Later in the interview, he estimates the impact of temporary workers on Permian: "I'd say three quarters of the population are permanent. One quarter of it is temporary."

Arthur differentiated the two segments as locals vs. transient: "I consider the locals as the ones that who have to been here through booms and busts of the oil field, whereas you know the transient population that the oil field brings in comes and goes." The extraordinarily high percentage of transient workers had implications beyond personal ties, of course. Alice pointed out that "we can't count those little trailers" when appealing to developers, for instance. How long did these temporary workers stay? According to Andy, "Some of them are here three months, some are here for a year or two"—hardly enough time to become integrated into community life.

Some interviews suggest that this gulf between temporary and permanent residents ran both ways, creating insiders and outsiders. Alicia and her husband moved to Permian six years before we interviewed her; they are now homeowners and business owners, but still, "we're outsiders." As an outsider, Alicia says that the key to a successful business in Permian is to understand insiders' ties: "everybody knows everybody, so don't say shit."

Our narrative analysis turned up stories about how Permian's personal ties were lost. Angela identifies one cause: "it's more transient now" due to the sand boom. She adds:

Whenever they started mining the sand, it really, it was like, it was crazy around here. You couldn't even find a place to live. One of the girls that came to work for me, she came here from ... Mississippi. She came here and she did not—she had a backpack. And

by the time she left, she had a car, she had, a house, she had furniture. And she was here for like a year and a half. I mean the money was—it was bringing all kinds of people in.

Andrea noted how the influx of workers caused distance in the community: whereas formerly “you [would] go to the store and you [would] only see your local people,” during the recent boom, “it was like, wow, I don’t know anybody in the store.” These strangers had different expectations for interactions: Andrea felt that the strangers were being rude, but acknowledged that, to the strangers, sometimes the residents themselves seemed rude.

The boom was coming to an end, and although Permian was still feeling some positive economic effects, Andy characterized the boom-and-bust cycle as creating longer-term problems: the influx of workers strained infrastructure and drove up the cost of Permian’s limited housing, while many of the new businesses created by the boom had since “packed up and gone.” Meanwhile, since the boom had largely brought in workers as residents, as opposed to wealthier owners or managers, ranchers felt no pressure to sell their land—and thus no opportunity existed to develop land to support new housing, shopping centers, or businesses that would outlast the coming bust. Arlen elaborated on how these cycles destabilized Permian: “we have people move in, we thrive for a few years, and then if it goes bust, we lose those people, people lose their jobs, and the county, city, and schools lose funding.”

This issue of large landowners was often raised as a cause for low personal ties. Because most of the mining operations are set up on the outskirts of town and just outside city limits, the city is essentially limited to sales tax revenue. The county and the city are divided: the county can draw on mining revenue and thus can ignore small businesses and other city concerns. Yet the town cannot expand its city limits to recapture this tax base because a few ranching families control all

the available land outside Permian. Ranchers are “land rich” (to use a term we heard in Xville), and the older generation of ranchers refuse to sell due to its potential value for oil and sand leases (according to Andrea, Alan, Alicia, and Andy). As Andrea said, “I think the property is the problem. Nobody wants to sell land. You know most of us around us; they’re ranchers. So it’s hard for [Permian] to, to expand.” Alicia told us,

They always say, four expensive funerals have to happen for [Permian] to actually grow, because those that own the lands around [Permian] refuse to allow [Permian] to grow..... A lot of times, industries have come to [Permian] for that, hey, let’s build you up, let’s expand—and it’s been shot down.

Alan affirmed, “We do have some of our older ranchers who have died off. The kids have the ranch now and they’re willing to sell, where the old ones wouldn’t.” We heard similar sentiments in Sandville and Heritage.

Permian also competes with other cities for water rights on surrounding land. Alan remarked that some landowners in Permian have sold their water rights to a larger city 50 miles away, leaving Permian’s own water supply situation tenuous.

We had a bunch of yahoos who bought some land out north of town and that, boy, they sold it, and there was a well out here and now Midland’s getting that water. So yeah, they drain us dry for their prosperity.

Permian’s tenuous water supply situation is exacerbated by the additional strain that temporary workers place on the system.

Critically, interviewees did not condemn land ownership *itself*, but how landowners chose to use their land in ways that benefited themselves rather than the community. Andrea provides a counterexample. “We did have one rancher offer, *he would sell only to a grocery store*. But no one, no one ever even looked or offered” (our emphasis).

Interviewees in other communities similarly told stories of how landowners’ interests contradicted community members’ interests. In many parts of rural Texas, a few landowners can bottle up development simply by declining to sell. Within such a “land-locked” community, land prices rise artificially, leading landowners to be even more reluctant to sell; the community itself cannot expand its tax base via annexation, and the community cannot build roadways or infrastructure past city limits—as is the case in Permian. Being “land-rich” (as Cal in Xville characterized it) means that just by holding the land, these owners can exert control over development. Even within a community, if landowners don’t sell, the city can’t build out roadways or other infrastructure. Xville is reluctant to use eminent domain, so although they would like to build new roads, they are constrained to upgrading existing roads through traffic calming devices such as roundabouts.

In Permian, Xville, Freerange, and Heritage, interviewees claimed that older owners value land more, while their children are more willing to sell. In controlling large tracts of land, families had cemented power, power that was often perceived as being used in ways that threatened the community’s interests. So stories associating land ownership with threats to community ties were common across communities. But unlike Permian, other communities had already begun to have their “four expensive funerals.” Those communities told stories in which the cause had eased—heirs had begun selling land—resulting in stronger personal community ties.

In total, seven of the eight interviewees discussed how longtime residents had attempted to limit change in Permian, while one talked specifically about temporary workers and five described how residents had turned inward rather than developing ties.

Lack of moral expectation for community members to participate in community life Whereas people not serving in Permian's local government characterized it as being riddled with incompetence and corruption, some—especially city officials—also charged that residents were shirking the moral obligation to participate.

The city residents do not get involved in city councils or commissioners or anything like that, you know. They'd just rather just stay at it, and moan and groan. (Andrea)

There was a development company that came in and sat in on meetings.... I was real disappointed in the attendance from the public. One of them, they came in and had all this stuff and they want you to write down and put sticky notes on it, and there might have been 30 people. (Alan)

On the other hand, residents justified their lack of participation, not just by telling stories of scandals and corruption, but also by claiming that city officials are beholden to the local landowners and are resistant to any kind of meaningful change. Audrey remarked, "I know all of the old-timers, they don't want to see anything new." But this lack of agency was articulated perhaps most succinctly by Andrea, who remarked, "It just feels like it's always going to be the same town, no matter what changes around us."

Unlike Permian, in other communities, residents are willing to volunteer more and participate more in community life. For instance, a few years ago, several sand mines in Sandville closed,

with operations moving to the outskirts of Permia. This resulted in a substantial loss of jobs in Sandville. On paper, Sandville is worse off than Permia across a range of indicators. Its equity scores are substantially lower (see Table I). Its decennial response rates for 2010 and 2020, a measure of social cohesion, are even lower than Permia's (for 2010, 56.6%; for 2020, 48.2%)—although the drop from 2010 to 2020 was not nearly as sharp [30].

Unlike Permia, Sandville is designated as experiencing persistent poverty (according to USDA County Typology codes) [48]. And although Sandville has many entry-level hourly jobs and some higher-paying jobs, it lacks mid-level jobs, meaning that many residents must either work outside the community or leave after high school. Yet despite these drawbacks, interviewees in Sandville describe participating in community life: they speak of volunteering, they have sustained nonprofits and clubs, and they hold annual celebrations including a Fourth of July event and an annual goat roast. More importantly, in their interviews they recognize each other's interests and are willing to deliberate about common solutions—a willingness that Permia's residents do not seem to share, based on our interviews.

Our interviewees told causal stories about how community members had begun avoiding this moral obligation to participate in community deliberation. Andrea saw this trend as generational: the “older generation” preferred to stymie change in the community, so “I think the younger generation needs to get more involved. And we just don't have that here.” Angela said something similar. Although not referring to generations specifically, Andy noted that “people are reluctant to serve public offices anymore.” He also described lessening participation in public forums such as state legislator visits and the National Day of Prayer and described a public meeting on the budget that no one attended. Andy allowed that “some of the old, older generation” could be

considered leaders in terms of community values, but in the same breath, he mentioned community outreach driven by a major petroleum company.

On the other side, Alicia, who still considered herself an “outsider” despite living in Permian for years, does not see genuine opportunities to participate in community deliberations.

It’s very much Old Guard, and they complain about a lot, but when you come up with change and options you get shut down, so it’s like they really don’t want to. They don’t want to improve. They kind of just want you to sit there and listen.

Similarly, Audrey complains about how the city government is not interested in new ideas from the community. “I think they vote no on everything.”

Although similarly describing dwindling interest to participate in community life, Alan discusses it in terms of continuing small businesses, complaining that the older generation has not sufficiently worked to find new business leaders. “‘Let somebody else do it.’ You know, the somebody else is getting few and far between.”

Although we have thus far identified several stories that claim *causes* for not participating in community life, this category of story—the lack of moral expectation to participate—is also understood as an *effect* of deteriorating community. After all, if residents feel no agency within their community, then problems suddenly become somebody else’s problem, and the mutual ties that bind a community together and make it work begin to fray.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Below, we discuss conclusions and limitations as well as implications for community-based research performed by professional communicators.

Conclusions How do interviewees make sense of residents' unwillingness to participate in Permian's public life? In this study, we have identified three themes across these interviews, three barriers to addressing geographically bound community needs:

- Lack of trust in institutions
- Lack of personal ties
- Lack of felt moral obligation to participate

These themes, though visible in other communities, are all exacerbated in Permian due to its boom-bust cycle. Although residents tell causal stories about each of these themes, we see indicators that these issues are complexly related, reinforcing each other. For instance, the distinction between transient and permanent residents has meant that some people do not seek to become invested in the community—but it also means that some people who do seek to become permanent residents, such as Alicia, are not recognized as such even after years of residency. It means that public office is often held by “old-timers” who have had the time and status to build their social networks, and these “old-timers” tend to be conservative about community change—and may conduct business in a way that reflects their personal ties rather than public interests. It means that residents who have inherited wealth and land have outsized influence, but do not necessarily feel a responsibility to their community. And it means that residents who might be

expected to feel the moral obligation to participate instead feel as if they are unwelcome in public forums.

These three barriers form a tangled knot that must be untied if Permia is to have productive discussions. But how?

Implications What can we offer to communities such as Permia? Professional communicators have often been involved in community-based interventions that involve bringing stakeholders together to deliberate: in town halls, charettes, and participatory design work. Yet such interventions are predicated on the willingness of community members to participate, voicing their perspectives and engaging in productive dialogue.

Permia's residents do not show this willingness to participate, and according to Alan, a previous intervention failed to draw many participants. Without willingness to participate, such interventions could end up failing—or representing only those participants who feel invested, such as the “old-timers” who already hold institutional power in Permia and similar communities. Neither outcome is positive.

Thus, Permia's case suggests that when planning such interventions, professional communicators should consider assessing how ready the community is to participate in them. Through this study, we have developed three characteristics to assess:

- The community's trust in institutions
- Its personal ties
- Its felt moral obligation to participate

And we have explored these characteristics by examining interviewees' causal stories. Based on these, we suggest that professional communication researchers need a *concept, measures, and reports* addressing communities' readiness for deliberation.

*Develop a **concept** for exploring communities' readiness for deliberation* The three characteristics mentioned above emerged from our coding scheme. However, in retrospect, these characteristics echo the sociological concept of solidarity, which characterizes how communities develop and maintain their ties to remain cohesive. Sociologists have developed a vast literature on solidarity, including several empirically operationalizable models (e.g., [49]). Although professional communicators have invoked solidarity as a general concept, they have not applied it as an empirically operationalizable model—which, we believe, is a critical step for characterizing communities' readiness for deliberation. Thus, professional communicators should either (a) test and adopt such a concept model from the many on offer in the sociological literature or (b) develop an analogous model that is fine-tuned for professional communication research.

*Develop **measures** for assessing community readiness for deliberation* Related, professional communication researchers should focus on developing solidarity-based measures for assessing community readiness. Such measures are critical: The professional communication literature identifies several cases in which interventions are planned without sufficiently considering categories of stakeholders and their interests [5], [15], [20]. Measures could include targeted interviews, broad surveys, and census data. Through these, researchers might determine whether a specific intervention might draw broad participation, helping them to select an intervention that best fits the community's readiness. They might also be able to identify which interventions are likely to facilitate participation from underserved communities.

Narrative inquiry could provide a first step to planning such interventions: Once we understand threats to community deliberation, we can identify intervention strategies and potential participants.

Provide reports of community readiness to stakeholders Professional communicators can also report the feedback received from community members, identifying points of agreement and disagreement so that they can see each other's perspectives and concerns in a different venue (as Phelps suggests: [29], p.152). Our research team generated a community-facing report and sent it to all interviewees. This report identified broad themes and paraphrased common responses to highlight points of agreement. Our goal was to identify common ground so that these community leaders could better understand each other's perspectives without provoking confrontation.

Narrative inquiry is well positioned to expose different perspectives in such reports.

Limitations This study had two important limitations.

First, as we have established, Permian's residents do not tend to get involved—and that fact also applies to participation in this study. As discussed above, Author 2 had to work hard to find participants. Although our approach to finding leaders—through public, private, nonprofit, and religious domains—worked well in other communities, Permian's institutions were in enough disrepair that Author 2 found it difficult to connect to those leaders here. For instance, because the Chamber of Commerce was on hiatus, he had to identify and cold-call business owners directly. No religious leaders answered his calls, so they were not represented in the interviewees. Doing this kind of narrative analysis itself requires a certain level of participation itself. Thus, our conclusions are limited and preliminary.

They are also limited because, despite Author 2's efforts, the participants who did respond did not represent the full community of Permian. Only one interviewee was from a nonprofit, and none represented religious organizations. Although we did not collect demographic data, based on surnames, the Hispanic majority was not represented well. These limitations are severe and suggest that future studies need different approaches for approaching and involving participants.

Second and related, this research is qualitative and relies on a small sample. Thus, it cannot be directly generalized to other communities except insofar as the characteristics that we have identified are echoed in other studies.

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Clay Spinuzzi is a professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. He received his B.A. in computer science in 1991 and his M.A. in English with an emphasis in technical writing in 1994, both from the University of North Texas in Denton, TX, USA, then earned his Ph.D. in rhetoric and professional communication in 1999 from Iowa State University in Ames, IA, USA. His research interests include workplace studies, qualitative research methodology, activity theory, actor-network theory, and genre theory.

Andrew Booth is a Ph.D. candidate in rhetoric and writing at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA, where he studies rhetorical theory, political theory, and aesthetics. He received his M.A. in Rhetoric and Composition from Texas State University in San Marcos, TX, USA, in 2017.

Maclain Scott is an Assistant Professor of English and the Director of First-Year Composition at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, MT, USA. He earned his B.A. in English with an emphasis in English Education in 2012, and his M.A. in English Studies in 2016, both from Illinois State University in Normal, IL, USA. In 2023, he earned his Ph.D. in English with a concentration in

rhetoric and writing from the University of Texas at Austin in Austin, TX, USA. His research interests include rhetorical theory, composition pedagogy, and writing technologies.

Drake Gossi is a Ph.D. student in rhetoric and writing at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. He earned his B.A. in English in 2013 and his M.A. in English in 2017, both at the University of Nevada, Reno, in Reno, NV, USA. His research interests include small-town entrepreneurial ecosystems, actor-network theory, and affect.

Tristin Brynn Hooker is Graduate Service Coordinator at the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. She received her Ph.D. in rhetoric and writing from the University of Texas at Austin in 2024. She earned her M.A. in writing studies from Missouri State University in Springfield, MO, USA in 2016, Master of Arts in Teaching/English Education from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, CA, USA in 2011, and B.A. in English Language and Literature from William Jewell College in Liberty, MO, USA in 2006. Her research interests include the rhetoric of health and medicine, public policy and advocacy, and qualitative research. Her dissertation focuses on the rhetoric of rare diseases.

Nigel O’Hearn is a Ph.D. student in English at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA. In 2009, he received his B.A. in English Writing and Theatre from St. Edward’s University in Austin, TX, USA, and an M.A. in the Humanities from the University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA in 2017. His research leverages rhetorical theory to read the production of postwar and contemporary American drama through its institutional and sociohistorical practices.