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Collective Memory and Place Attachment Expressed as Communicative Constitution of Community

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COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND PLACE ATTACHMENT EXPRESSED AS COMMUNICATIVE CONSTITUTION OF COMMUNITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-six residents of Ralston, Nebraska recorded oral histories for use in the city library's 100-year anniversary celebration. The recordings build a limited history of the city and expose residents' collective memories as a conduit to place attachment in a changing community. By positioning the City of Ralston as an organization using the Four Flows approach to the communicative constitution of organization [CCO], I examined communication by members of the organization as maintaining the city. Qualitative coding of the city's Facebook page and narrative analysis of the oral history recordings produced identifiable categories related to collective memory, place attachment, and the Four Flows model of CCO which highlight the experiences of residents in one small Midwest city as they work to face economic and social challenges. The work examines collective memories and place attachment in the expressed needs of participating residents and identifies avenues for communication about current and future city issues between the local government and residents as members of an organization.

Keywords: collective memory, communicative constitution of organization, four flows, Nebraska, oral history, place attachment

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends who believed in me until I believed in myself, I dedicate this work and my future achievements.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

At its core, this is a study about memory, attachment to community, and how communication affects organization. The studied location, Ralston, Nebraska, is a small, independent city which is landlocked within the borders of the Omaha, Nebraska metropolitan area. Much information about the City of Ralston and its unique position and problems is available throughout this paper including a special section dedicated to the history of the community. Individual recollections of times past and present are featured as data sources as are public communications on Facebook. To explain and set up the framework for the project, this introduction includes a broad view of memory, place attachment and organizational communication with real challenges to the community linked throughout. To move forward, we first must explore the past.

Memory studies is gaining traction as an independent field (Kattago, 2016; Olick et al., 2017). However, memory cannot be separated from the feeling people who form and maintain attachments to places and experiences. Memories link people to places and spaces, assist in forming identities and identifications, and allow people to speak from their own points of view about shared experiences (Drozdzewski & Birdsall, 2019). Donohoe (2014) suggests that exploring memories in place demands that researchers understand the connections between identification with a community and a person's worldviews. For these reasons, memory research requires honoring participants' unique contributions alongside an acknowledgment of the recalled experiences as just that, individual recollections (Drozdzewski & Birdsall, 2019).

Dickinson (1997) wrote at length about links between memory, place, and identity while arguing that nostalgia is inextricable from the fragmentation of cities as people

actively seek to live in familiar places with familiar, and homogenous, faces. In examining the splintering of a large metropolitan area, Dickinson (1997) begins to make connections between memory and postmodern consumer culture wherein the look of a series of storefronts (e.g. “a place” that incorporates visual rhetoric in branding and design) evokes comfort and encourages the opening of wallets, which is necessary in our current economic system, to maintaining the availability of a place which in turn serves to foster place attachment—an emotional connection to a place—in individual visitors. Dickinson and Maugh (2004) make similar connections and claims in their examination of the store Wild Oats as a place of comfort for regular shoppers. The connections between the tastes, smells, textures, and visuals available in Wild Oats and the modern concept of wellness appeal to shoppers (Dickinson & Maugh, 2004) who possess the financial means to support the store and thus maintain the place to which they are emotionally attached.

Midwestern states, cities, and rural areas are experiencing the full brunt of the same postmodern consumer culture as they fight to remain relevant and financially stable places where residents are willing to pay taxes and visitors are motivated to consumerism. Unfortunately, this is more difficult than ever as young people tend to leave rural areas and smaller cities for urban centers to pursue education and early career opportunities (Plane & Jurjevich, 2009) thus taking their money, ideas, power as workers, and potential to maintain or increase the local population with them. Low, et al, (2022) write that individual movement from rural areas and small towns is further complicated by tax revenue and employer movement out of the same areas. Increased personal mobility and a need for access to workers has moved businesses out of smaller towns and

into larger, neighboring towns or into suburban and urban areas with higher population density (Low, et.al., 2022). Through attempts at tourism marketing and efforts to brand their locations as unique, livable, desirable, and valuable, each community and neighborhood vies for limited—Plane and Jurjevich (2009) would say dwindling—human and economic capital. The most recent pandemic and the resulting move for some people from office-bound, big city dwelling workers to work-from-home, freedom of movement vagabonds received much coverage in the popular press, but research on "reverse migration" (the movement of people from urban to rural areas) shows that the most recent numbers show little population and economic gain in most rural areas and small towns (Low, et. al., 2022). Encouraging and developing place attachment is one established method of attracting new residents and keeping those already there which solidifies the economic and human capital available in an area (Plane & Jurjevich, 2009). Although place attachment functions as a conduit to retaining people and their spending power in an area, those individuals are—as mentioned previously—feeling people who have needs and wants related to living in a place, and they expect their communities and the leadership within to consider those needs and wants in planning and decision-making processes. Existing literature, however, shows us that there are additional barriers to individuals' communicating with local authority figures, and with local authority figures' public communication.

In a (2020) study based in the Gifford Park neighborhood of Omaha, Nebraska, Samantha Senda-Cook focused on the area's transition from "dangerous and violent" (p. 419) to something that residents of the area reluctantly find more palatable. Senda-Cook (2020) uses the concepts of memory, place, and identity to build a picture of Gifford

Park. The author relies on environmental observations and the relayed experiences of residents as a community narrative as forces of economic change and gentrification move through the neighborhood while displacing the poorest residents. Ralston, Nebraska is a mere 7 miles from Gifford Park in Omaha, and both lie in the same metropolitan area. The two locations tell mirrored histories beginning with court-enforced desegregation orders of the early 1970s.

The 1970s brought white flight to Omaha (Fanta, 2023a). Prior to court intervention in the city's largest and most populous school system's student assignment plan, the move west out of Omaha was more akin to a white trot. Beginning in the early 1900s, people moved out of Omaha to escape what, at that point, was a crime-ridden river town heavily populated by men doing hard labor and enjoying the vices their money could procure (Bristow, 2000), but the use of redlining beginning in the 1920s created a version of the city in certain areas which was intended to attract and retain white and wealthier residents and families (Sasse Fletcher, 2023). People moved from areas like Gifford Park, in the northeast part of the city, to areas further west within the city or to suburban communities like Ralston. In essence, today finds the two locales in the opposite situation than that found during the 1970s; while Gifford Park is becoming more attractive to developers and other economic forces within Omaha (Senda-Cook, 2020), Ralston has lost its status as a refuge from the city (Oral histories 3, 6, & 22, 2022) Using Senda-Cook's (2020) work as a model and adding communicative constitution of organizations [CCO] as a guiding concept will provide a flip-side perspective to the long-term results of movement and demographic change in a neighborhood or small city (i.e. an organization). While the residents of Gifford Park (one organization) are reluctantly

experiencing an economic revival, residents of Ralston (another organization) are living in the city amidst an economic downturn.

Although this is a localized study, many cities and towns throughout the United States [U.S.] are navigating the challenges that face Ralston, Nebraska. Increased economic pressure brought on by the recent pandemic and inflation are not unique to Nebraska or the Midwestern U.S. (Hopkins et al., 2020). Demographic changes in communities—whether that includes people being pushed out of formerly affordable housing via gentrification, an increase in corporate ownership of homes used as rental units, or new people moving into an area of a city—are present and pressing local schools and city governments across the country (Hopkins et al., 2020). Although this research does not purport to resolve any of those issues, looking at what connects people to a community and unites them as an organization offers one view of what is important to people in maintaining that organization. Efforts to attract and retain residents despite rising costs of living require a unique approach that can be generated by looking at the social memories and place attachments of current residents as openings for future conversations.

The City of Ralston, Nebraska and other similarly sized municipalities currently face a two-headed monster comprised of rising costs and reduced or stagnant tax receipts (Hopkins et al., 2020). Conventional approaches to this issue include handing complex decisions to residents through methods like surveying community members about spending priorities and seeking to raise revenues through project-specific bond funding or increased property and local sales taxes (Lomas et al., 2021). The same difficulties faced by cities are confronted by residents in their own lives. Individuals are not immune to the

effects of inflation. This leaves people—and the cities they occupy—with a difficult choice. Do they stay or do they go? CCO provides a structure to examine the choice between maintaining the organization or allowing it to decline.

Manzo & Perkins' 2006 work on "the importance of place attachment to community participation" (p. 335) tells us that people who feel a sense of place attachment are more likely to participate in decisions made about their communities. Connections to a community are formed partially through experiences and the long-term memories of those experiences (Drozdzewski et al., 2016; Senda-Cook, 2020). Based on previously published literature, there is a connection between memory and forming place attachment (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Hernández et al., 2007; Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Place attachments formed via social memory may be key to keeping people—and their spending—in in a city (Lomas et al., 2021).

CCO provides a framework for viewing the actors in an organization as both independent and a whole (Schoenborn & Vasquez, 2017). Examining how residents are connected to a place through social memory and the expressed needs of a selection of residents has the potential to produce recommendations for local governments on communicating with their public in ways that meet people where they are while honoring and promoting connection to community and continued residency.

Returning to Dickinson's (1997) work focused on Old Pasadena, we see that the author's arguments are applicable elsewhere. Ralston, Nebraska, like Pasadena, is a city within a city with a recorded local history as well as challenges and opportunities that face communities with both aging and increasingly diverse populations. Prior to and since the publication of Dickinson's (1997) work on Old Pasadena, much has been

written about the rhetorics of place. Indeed, the importance of place as a mnemonic device for ancient rhetoric and its eventual development into a popular focus for rhetorical criticism is chronicled in many published pieces (Brummett, 1984; Haskins, 2006). However, much of that work is focused on highly specific places and environments like monuments and museums (Blair & Michel, 2000; Ewalt, 2011; Zagacki & Gallagher, 2009), time-bound events (Helgren, 2015; Hess & Herbig, 2013) or human recreational and conservation pursuits (E. Dickinson, 2011; Druschke, 2013; Modesti, 2008). The work in this paper, rather than offering a rhetorical analysis of place, makes connections between social memory, place attachment, and citizens' communication with local government by applying narrative analysis to oral histories from city residents and qualitative coding to the city's official Facebook page while using public records and news articles to contextualize the data in a location not previously mentioned in the extant literature. Using CCO as the foundational underpinning of the study provides an organizational communication framework from which comes useful and valuable recommendations for nurturing the City of Ralston and its residents as a surviving organization.

To better explain how these concepts work in the location of choice—the City of Ralston, Nebraska—a brief history of the place is included as Chapter Two.

CHAPTER II – A BRIEF HISTORY OF RALSTON NEBRASKA

"Ralston is an enigma."

-Ralston Public Library, Oral history 20, 2022

Ralston, Nebraska—a town of 6,494 individual residents (United States Census Bureau, 2023)—is inside south-central Omaha, Nebraska. Omaha, the largest city in Nebraska, surrounds Ralston on the east, west, and north. The City of LaVista, Nebraska—population 16,648-- (Droszd & Deichert, 2018) --abuts the southern border of Ralston. The City of Ralston is a small independent town found within a city of nearly 500,000 people that exists within a metropolitan area of more than 1 million people (Droszd & Deichert, 2018). City of Ralston entities include a city manager, an elected mayor and city council members, a volunteer fire department, a police department, a road maintenance department, a city library, and a school district (Reiner, 2023). These services are provided by, and funded by, its 6,494 residents in approximately 1.65 square miles of land. Ralston's unique position—geographically and financially—qualifies it as an enigma.

The City of Ralston's location--inside Omaha's borders--provides opportunities for work and recreation not available in immediate proximity to 6,000 person towns. However, Ralston's inability to expand geographically to increase its tax base places the city in a particularly difficult financial position. As wages and prices for goods and services increase, the residents of the city bear the weight of the increases with higher real estate taxes than any other taxed area within the state of Nebraska (van Kampen, 2023). The financial history of Ralston is colorful, and to understand the current challenges and opportunities of the place and its residents, we return to the town's

incorporation in 1912. During this time, the City of Omaha was known as a “dirty, wicked town” (Bristow, 2000, p. 1) and residents looked outside its borders to towns like Ralston for refuge (Bristow, 2000).

Ralston’s petition for incorporation was adopted by the Douglas County Board of Commissions on June 24, 1912 (Shooter, 1987). Less than a year later, on March 23, 1913, a tornado ripped through the town and destroyed buildings in the downtown area including the Howard Stove Works, the major employer in the city (Shooter, 1987). As the country marched through World War I, through the 1920s, and toward the Great Depression, the population of Ralston grew from 455 residents to 809 residents (Droszd & Deichert, 2018). Then, in 1934, the City of Ralston experienced another tragedy. A fire destroyed part of the city (Shooter, 1987). By then, the Midwestern United States was in the throes of the Great Depression, and Ralston, Nebraska was not immune from the financial meltdown. The 1934 fire pushed the fledgling city to a fiscal crisis.

As business owners permanently shuttered or rebuilt in other areas, the city found itself in dire financial straits resulting in the City of Ralston declaring bankruptcy (Shooter, 1987). The city bears the distinction of being one of the first municipalities in the United States to declare bankruptcy (Moring, 2019). According to some sources, Ralston was the first U.S. town to declare bankruptcy (Oral History 4, 2022; Shooter, 1987), and, when the city defaulted, credit notices and bonds were burned in a “big fire in front of City Hall” (Oral history 4, 2022) as citizens celebrated in the streets.

Through the 1930s, the population of Ralston remained stable. After World War II, more people moved into the town, and by 1950, the population increased to 1300 individuals (Droszd & Deichert, 2018). Many small tract homes were built during the

1940s and 50s as suburbs and small towns benefitted from the federal money that accompanied veterans moving into the area (Shooter, 1987). The City of Ralston may have been attractive in part because it is adjacent to Omaha, which boasts a Veteran's Administration Hospital, and to Bellevue, Nebraska, which is home to Offutt Air Force Base. The area also includes several higher education institutions that employed staff to help former service members in using their GI Bill education benefits (Leszczynski, 2021).

As the small towns surrounding Omaha experienced increasing populations, and available land was developed into housing and businesses, the tax base expanded making those areas attractive for annexation by the City of Omaha (Knox et al., 2015). Annexation involving city boundaries is a process whereby a city expands its boundaries to include nearby land or a smaller city in those new boundaries. Once annexed, the smaller city is legally part of the larger city and receives public services—fire, police, road maintenance—from the larger city, but the citizens are now subject to the tax rules and other laws of the larger city (Corporate Limits; How Fixed; Annexation of Cities or Villages; Limitation; Powers and Duties of City Council, 2022). In city planning terms, it is viewed as beneficial for the larger city in all cases because it expands the tax base of the larger city at minimal cost. Nebraska has a unique law regarding annexation. It states that,

> The city council of any city of the metropolitan class may at any time extend the corporate limits of such city over any contiguous or adjacent lands, lots, tracts, streets, or highways, such distance as may be deemed proper in any direction, and may include, annex, merge, or consolidate with such city of the metropolitan

> class, by such extension of its limits, any adjoining city of the first class having a population of less than ten thousand inhabitants as determined by the most recent federal decennial census or the most recent revised certified count by the United States Bureau of the Census or any adjoining city of the second class or village (Corporate Limits; How Fixed; Annexation of Cities or Villages; Limitation; Powers and Duties of City Council, 2022).

In short, this statute gives cities in Nebraska with populations of more than 10,000 individuals the ability to annex any area that adjoins the city and contains a population of fewer than 10,000 residents. The city council can also vote to extend the city's boundaries so that it adjoins a populated area that it wishes to annex (Corporate Limits; How Fixed; Annexation of Cities or Villages; Limitation; Powers and Duties of City Council, 2022). Although this statute has been challenged in Nebraska courts several times, Omaha successfully annexes areas around the current city boundaries each year and has done so since the 1920s (Moring, 2019). Why, then, is the City of Ralston, which has directly bordered Omaha for decades, still standing as independent? Historical records provide two answers: debt and a 1960s-era unwritten agreement (Leszczynski, 2021).

The city, newly free from debt in the 1930s and fortunate to see population and home construction growth in the 1940s and 50s, experienced another population and construction boom in the 1960s and 70s (Oral history 5, 2022). As the population of Omaha grew rapidly, movement to the suburbs and small towns surrounding the city increased (Oral history 22, 2022). At the time of the 1960 Census, Ralston’s population was 2,977 people and in 1970, it was 4,731 individuals (Droszd & Deichert, 2018) During these years, several industries called Ralston home and employed many people in

the city and from outside areas. Ralston paid off its debts in the early 1960s (Moring, 2019) and was able to invest in infrastructure then (Shooter, 1987). Although the streets remained unpaved until the mid-1960s, and there was something of a wild west feeling about the city, residents strongly identified with the community of Ralston and celebrated being part of a small town (Oral histories 2, 4, 7, and 21, 2022).

The city lives in residents' memories as an idyllic place during the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. It is recalled as "the best place to grow up" (Oral history 4, 2022) and "a perfect place to raise children and be involved in the community" (Oral history 18, 2022). However, there are a few long-time residents with different memories of this time. One resident stated that their family faced, "isolation and ridicule" for disagreeing with decisions made by elected city leadership (personal email communication, 2022). They went on to say, "In the 1960s, there were a lot of back-room deals being made. My parents felt that it was a mistake to make public investments in private property, but they were the vocal minority. They were nearly run out of town for speaking up" (personal email communication, 2022).

One of the most notable backroom deals in the late 1960s is referred to as a "gentleman's agreement" (Mooring, para. 5, 2018) or a "handshake agreement" (Knox, et al., p. 8, para. 6, 2016) between the mayors of Ralston and Omaha. The city leaders agreed that if Ralston stayed within its current boundaries—encompassing the same 1.65 square miles it occupies today—Omaha would not annex the town (Oral Histories 8 & 25, 2022). The agreement has held since that time in part due to the unattractive financial status of Ralston since the early 1970s (Moring, 2018). After significant debt accrual related to infrastructure development and school construction in the late 1960s and early

1970s (Shooter, 1987), the city suffered from yet another natural disaster in 1975 (Oral histories 1 & 10, 2022).

On May 6, 1975, an EF4 rated tornado—categorized by winds up to 200mph and the capacity to knock down even well-constructed frame homes and buildings (The Enhanced Fujita Scale, 1970)—tore through Ralston flattening homes, apartment buildings, and businesses. In 1975, the estimated cost to rebuild the devastated area that extended from Bellevue, Nebraska through Ralston and into the North Central part of Omaha was $1.1 billion (National Weather Service: Omaha/Valley Branch, n.d.). Once again, the little city that could set out to rebuild and restore the buildings and landscape of the town. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, after rebuilding, Ralston was the place for people fleeing Omaha.

As Omaha wrestled with desegregation orders for schools and Federal District Court oversight to address school segregation (Fanta, 2023b) the city lost 1 in 24 Omaha Public Schools' students to the suburbs as white flight dramatically increased (Fanta, 2023a). As bussing began to address The Omaha Public Schools' racial segregation issues, Ralston's population boomed to 5,000 individuals (Droszd & Deichert, 2018). Ralston residents from that time recall excitement over the city's growth and a family atmosphere (Oral history 21, 2022). One resident tragically lost his father at an early age but felt "like people came together to take care of my family" without asking for anything in return (Oral history 13, 2022). As people fled Omaha for the suburbs, Ralston benefitted from increased population, new construction, and an expanded tax base.

Fast forward to the late 1990s, and the city reached its population peak of 7,000 residents. Ralston was considered "the place to be. Everyone wanted to live here" (Oral

history 19, 2022). A new mayor was elected on the promise of building a new library, funding improved infrastructure, and preventing annexation of Ralston by the City of Omaha (Oral history 14, 2022). First elected in 1996, Don Groesser has served as Mayor of Ralston for 27 years. During that 27 years, the city's population has remained stable, but, since the 2010 Census, has recorded a rapidly growing Latinx population (*Hispanic or Latino, and Not Hispanic or Latino by Race*, 2020; *Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000*, 2000; United States Census Bureau, 2023). As of the 2020 U.S. Census, non-white identifying individuals comprise 17% (*Hispanic or Latino, and Not Hispanic or Latino by Race*, 2020) of the formerly nearly 100% white-identifying city population (*Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000*, 2000). Additionally, the non-white identifying population is younger and includes more families with school-aged children than the white identifying population (*Hispanic or Latino, and Not Hispanic or Latino by Race*, 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2023). According to 2018-2019 school-generated statistics, half of all students in the Ralston Public Schools are non-white identifying, 44% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 12% of students are English language learners (*Ralston Public Schools District Directory Information*, 2023). Almost 60% of students in the district live in rented housing (*Ralston High School*, 2023). These statistics are drastically different from those in the early 2000s including increases in diversity, rental units, and poor students (*Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000*, 2000). With changes come challenges and opportunities for communities and leaders.

During Groesser's tenure, Ralston's property taxes have risen dramatically in relation to neighboring homes in the cities of Omaha and LaVista, Nebraska (Konnath,

2018b, 2019), As the infrastructure of the city aged, funds to replace it while fulfilling campaign promises became an apparent challenge infused with urgency (Oral history 25, 2023). In 2010, a conversation between Groesser and the owner of a local hockey team—the Omaha Lancers—produced the vision of building an arena including ice rinks to generate additional tax revenues while avoiding increased property and sales taxes (Cordes, 2015; Staff, 2019). A 2010 feasibility study showed that the arena would generate $625,000 in revenues during the first year of operation (Moring, 2019; Pascale, 2019a). An urban development professional, interviewed for a 2015 newspaper article, stated "Arenas are never a money-making proposition. A city should not expect to make money on an arena but should plan for increased revenues from restaurants and hotels around the arena" (Mooring, para. 5, 2019). City of Ralston voters approved the construction and a bond issue to build the arena based on the feasibility study and the promise that Ralston would be "less attractive to annexation by Omaha" (Oral history 9, 2022) because of the city's increased debt.

Residents' hopes for debt-related rejections were fruitful in the worst possible ways. The arena, originally approved for construction at $29 million with a $30 million bond passed by voters, ballooned to a $41 million project requiring additional debt of $12 million (Pascale, 2019b; Staff, 2021). In a final blow to the city, Standard & Poor's issued a rating of BB (junk rating) for the city's debt which left leaders unable to borrow additional funds for pressing infrastructure and other public works-related needs (Konnath, 2018a; Ristau, 2019).

The arena opened in 2012, and in the first year of operations, it lost $3 million (Konnath, 2018b). One month after the Ralston Arena opened, a university located fewer

than three miles from Ralston, but also in the center of Omaha, announced plans to build an arena similar in size and composition to the Ralston Arena (Cordes, 2019). Adding to the city's arena-related woes, an agreement between the Omaha Lancers hockey team owner and City of Ralston leadership meant that other events were planned around the Omaha Lancers hockey season (Moring, 2019).

The arena is now 10 years old with 10 years of payments left on the original construction bond (Konnath, 2023). The facility, handed over to a private management firm after the city hired and fired three arena managers in the first two years of operation (Ristau, 2019; Staff, 2019), is still losing money each year. In 2022, the losses were slightly under $1 million for the first time since opening (Konnath, 2023). As a result of the arena experience, some Ralston residents feel misled by their elected officials and disillusioned about other proposed developments (Oral histories 5, 18, 22, 2022; personal email communication, 2023).

In 2010, residents overwhelmingly—75%--voted in favor of constructing and assuming debt for the proposed arena (Oral history 25, 2023; (Sullivan, 2019). However, in more recent years, city leadership has found ways to circumvent the public approval process for major projects (*"Economic Opportunity Zone" to Help Redevelop Ralston's Hinge*, 2020) or has relied on public-private partnerships (Associated Press, 2020; Reiner, 2023) which, much like the deal with the Omaha Lancers, have increased some community members' feelings of disenfranchisement (Oral histories 3, 17, 21, 2022; personal email communication, 2022).

A new city manager was hired in 2018 to facilitate development possibilities aided by the designation of Ralston's downtown and the area where the city borders

Omaha on the east as a Qualified Opportunity Zone (*"Economic Opportunity Zone" to Help Redevelop Ralston's Hinge*, 2020). According to the IRS, "Opportunity Zones are an economic development tool that allows people to invest in distressed areas in the United States. Their purpose is to spur economic growth and job creation in low-income communities while providing tax benefits to investors" (Opportunity Zones, 2022) This designation can be proposed by elected state representatives and is approved by meeting federally defined criteria (Opportunity Zones, 2022).

After this lucrative designation was approved—which Mayor Groesser's connection with Congressman Don Bacon facilitated (Oral history 26, 2023)—the new city manager was tasked with scouting development partnerships (Oral history 6, 2022; Oral history 25, 2023). One of the city manager's efforts to involve residents in decision-making was to roll out a monthly survey about a specific topic related to community development. The questionnaire was distributed to "selected contacts on an existing City of Ralston newsletter subscription list" (Ashford, 2021). The first emailed questionnaire generated 84 responses, and hopes were high for increased input as the survey effort became familiar to city residents (Ashford, 2021). However, city leadership's support for this community temperature-taking effort quickly lost support as participation continued to be low. The effort was disbanded after three months (Oral history 6, 2022; Oral history 26, 2023).

Despite the city manager's interest in requesting community input and early focus on asking people to provide that input, levels of engagement with city government remain low (Oral history 18, 2023; Ashford, 2021). Without information to the contrary, city

leadership assumes that no news is good news and that City of Ralston residents agree with their decisions (Oral history 26, 2023).

Fast-forward to 2023, and the City of Ralston is hoping for a renaissance. To reach economic revival and assure the city's continued independent survival requires leaders to balance the needs of residents and their desires to reclaim and/or maintain the small town feel that colors nostalgia about the city. With the Opportunity Zone designation, a partnership with venture capital firm I Can See It (Ashford, 2021; *"Economic Opportunity Zone" to Help Redevelop Ralston's Hinge*, 2020), leaders who want to hear from the community, and a newly diverse and relatively youthful population that contrasts the older, white-identifying population (*Hispanic or Latino, and Not Hispanic or Latino by Race*, 2020), Ralston leaders and residents face opportunities and challenges befitting this enigma of a city.

A recent city budget vote (Konnath, 2023) and subsequent city council meetings (*Ralston City Council Regular Meeting Minutes*, 2023) illustrate the tension between city leaders' best intentions and the daily concerns of some citizens. One Ralston resident attended public meetings to express discontent about the state of the city's sewer system. According to his testimony at a January 2023, city council meeting (personal communication, 2023), raw sewage has backed up into the basement of his home twice. The plumber responding to the most recent sewage back up informed the homeowner that the problem will continue until the city's sewer infrastructure needs are addressed (personal communication, 2023) The city—hampered by what some residents have called "misguided spending" (Konnath, 2018d) and inflation without corresponding increased revenue—has spent at least eight years working to address the known sewer problems

with very little progress (*Ralston City Council Regular Meeting Minutes*, 2023). A sewer systems specialist was hired in 2015 to begin addressing the city's sewer woes (*Ralston City Council Regular Meeting Minutes*, 2023). Today, that person oversees all city maintenance including parks and recreation and road maintenance with a staff of seven people that includes no other sewer systems specialists (*Public Works*, 2023). Department budgets and, accordingly, personnel budgets, were cut in response to the arena losing millions of dollars in the first years of operations (Robb, 2018; Staff, 2021; Sullivan, 2019). In late 2022, a sinkhole caused by sewage drainage problems was discovered under a trailer on city property (*Ralston City Council Regular Meeting Minutes*, 2023). Efforts to fix the sewer in that location were immediate and efficient, but repairs stopped there (*Ralston City Council Regular Meeting Minutes*, 2023). As neglected maintenance and repairs compound, Ralston leaders struggle to balance the city's budget with the arena continuing to lose money (Konnath, 2018a, 2018b) and planned developments stalled (Ashford, 2021) while residents begin to ask challenging questions about the future of Independence City.

Before we traverse into the deep waters of this study, a look at the current literature about CCO, place attachment, the city as organization, and collective memory is in order.

CHAPTER III – LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative constitution of organization and the Four Flows model

As a meta-theoretical assumption focused on explaining how organizations are defined and built by communication (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010; Weick, 1969), CCO has inspired multiple schools of thought in organizational communication. Until recently, possibly because of the significant emphasis on materiality as organizational construction, the Montreal School has been the dominant model employed and tested by researchers (Bruscella & Bisel, 2018). Rather than focusing on materiality and using the lens of the well-explored Montreal School (Koschmann, 2011), the work in this paper seeks to add to the body of research focused on agency alone, not the ability to affect change (Brummans, 2015; Cooren, 2006), as a driver of communicative constitution as described by the Four Flows model of CCO in McPhee (2015). To establish a fuller picture of CCO and how it is used in this study, we embark on a trip to the early days of sociology in France while seeking the origins of CCO.

Emile Durkheim proposed that interdependence exists between units of society, and those connections contribute to a sense of social unity (Boyne, 2014). Durkheim further proposed that social unity is boosted by identification with those around us who are responsible for the same or similar functions or who occupy a position perceived as equivalent to our own (Boyne, 2014). Durkheim wrote about two types of unity promoted by a common goal (solidarity), mechanical and organic solidarity (Jones, 1986). Mechanical solidarity relies on homogeneity within the population, and Durkheim attributes this to isolated or kinship-based societies (Jones, 1986). An example of this in the U.S. would be the solidarity that exists within Amish communities. The members of

the communities maintain similar lifestyles and work activities which are founded on clearly defined religious and educational training. Organic solidarity is attributed to industrialized societies wherein people have varied values and backgrounds but are united by their interdependence (Jones, 1986). An example of organic solidarity can be found in Ralston, Nebraska in the connections between the school system and the surrounding area. The school relies on people to send students to learn in their facilities and to partially fund their operations, the students rely on the school to provide qualified individuals to teach, and the larger community relies on the students to become productive members of that community in part through the education received at the school. Durkheim's early work on organizational structure and the function of people within in gave way to several theories and writings in the field of communication studies.

Giddens' work on structuration theory expands on Durkheim's writings and includes memory and identification with a place to make sense of the interaction between organizations and individuals (Boyne, 2014). Giddens (1979) places structure and agents on equal footing within his social theory. He challenges the focus on materialism common in organizational communication theory (Giddens, 1981) and argues that individuals' agency is limited by the opportunities and independence they experience within the structures in their lives (1979). Many scholars have used structuration to describe an immense variety of situations with myriad variables included (Bryant & Jary, 2014). The expansion of structuration theory to develop systems theory (Bryant & Jary, 2014) elevated the organization to a less dependent and more authoritative role (Bakker et al., 2018). While structuration and systems theory are valuable underpinnings for many communication-focused studies (Pilny et al., 2017; Scott et al., 1998; Sheerin et al.,

2020), the research in this paper places emphasis on the agency of the individual and the role that memory plays in the decision to exercise that agency as communication with local governments within an organizational communication framework. Accordingly, I employ the Four Flows model in part because it is based on Gidden's (1979) structuration theory which emphasizes memory and place as keys to understanding the interaction between individuals and organizations (Boyne, 2014). Giddens (1979) also rejects the notion of non-human agency which aligns with research using the Four Flows model of CCO (O'Conner & Shumate, 2010) including this work.

McPhee & Zaug's (2000) Four Flows model consists of four types of communication that constitute organization. The communications themselves must be human created but can take multiple forms such as text or speech (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). The four named flows are self-structuring communication, membership negotiation communication, activity coordination communication, and institutional positioning communication (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018). Examples of each are provided here as a path to increased understanding of how they are used in this work.

In membership negotiation, organizational boundaries are formed or maintained and are often displayed through the inclusion or exclusion of newcomers (Browning, et al., 2009). When talking as a member of the organization, a person can use "we" or "our" in a way that includes and excludes individuals and reinforces or defines those boundaries. In small towns and neighborhoods in the Midwest, you will hear individuals talk about "our schools" or "our library" or state that "we are nicknamed Independence City." When people self-identify to others as a member of an organization—saying "I'm

from Ralston," for example—they engage in self-structuring which helps to form shared meaning that structures the organization (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

One example of activity coordination is the task adoption and role negotiation that happens around an event. In small Midwest cities, this can be observed in planning for local celebrations. My own Iowa hometown of 700 people hosts "Fossil Day" every summer which involves coordination between individuals, volunteer organizations, city government, and county government, among others. Communication about responsibility for tasks and roles comprises the activity coordination flow.

Continuing with the example of the local celebration in a small town, people engage in dialogue about the position of each entity to help define their own. Communication about the place of the organization in relation to other organizations is emblematic of institutional positioning (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). The Four Flows approach to CCO is applied in this study as a framework for the concepts of place attachment and social memory—knowledge gained, formed, and communicated in relation to others—as they are represented by personal recollections of a small number of Ralston residents and exemplified in posts on the city's public Facebook page. Using the Four Flows model in this way provides evidence to fulfill the requirement that under the Four Flows model, CCO occurs when two or more of the flows converge (Browning, et al., 2009).

To illustrate how the Four Flows can potentially work in concert, I use the example of a small town's Chamber of Commerce—not unlike that currently found in Ralston, NE—recruiting new businesses to the organization. During a meeting about efforts to expand the Chamber, reasons to expand are discussed (membership negotiation)

including the benefits of new members to the organization and the city and the impact of recruitment on other local Chambers (institutional positioning). The group decides to engage personally with fellow entrepreneurs in their extended circles by setting meetings and extolling the benefits and positive attributes of the Chamber (self-structuring). New brochures to leave at local, non-member businesses (membership negotiation) are discussed, and messaging is determined (self-structuring). A member who owns a print shop will design brochures, the design will be submitted to a sub-committee for approval, and the print shop will be contracted for the printing (activity coordination). Although the Four Flows in the examples above are labeled as fulfilling only one of the flows, more than one flows must co-exist within communicative actions to affect organization (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). In other words, a flow doesn't exist alone, but works with at least one additional flow to achieve status as constitutive of organization. The examples provided in the results section of this paper illustrate the existence of more than one flow even though the examples are categorized by what the researchers determined to be the most prominent purpose of the communicative act (Hummon, 1992).

Looking at how McPhee & Zaug's (2000) Four Flows overlap and converge to build, rebuild, or alter the organization, its membership, and position it in the larger community, the role of individuals and their communication choices become illuminated (Putnam, et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the outsized role of materiality in the study of organizational communication has limited the number of studies devoted to expanding the Four Flows model (Bruscella & Bisel, 2018).

Putnam (2013) suggests that researchers explore dialectical tensions in organizations in relation to the Four Flows to provide a more complete look at how

communication constitutes organization. Today, ten years after publication, that mantle has yet to be assumed by communication researchers. Bruscella & Bisel (2018) outline the efforts of communication researchers to expand the Four Flows in their work on ISIL's use of material resources as a conduit to promoting the organization and find the list lacking. One notable expansion is Taylor's (2009) addition of coorientation as a prerequisite to CCO. Taylor (2009) argues that socially constructed relationships between agents are how communication is available to constitute organization. In other words, without shared interest in organization, communication will not happen and, following Taylor's (2009) reasoning, neither will organization. Coorientation as used to describe individual relationships as critical to organization formation, reformation, and/or dissolution (Taylor, 2009) invites the inclusion of place attachment and memory as part of that equation.

The Four Flows model of CCO used here is focused on individual communications that contribute to the organization or reorganization of the City of Ralston. This approach is unique in two ways, the consideration of the past—specifically social memory—and place attachment as contributing factors in how individuals exercise their communicative agency in organization.

Place attachment

Place attachment research has long focused on the emotional bonds that people have with their homes and neighborhoods (Raymond, et al., 2011). One of the first studies completed was sociological. In 1963, Fried studied the attachments of people in a forcibly revitalized Boston neighborhood. The neighborhood had been declared a victim of urban decay, and local leaders assumed that gentrification was the answer to the

residents' concerns (Fried, 1963). That assumption proved faulty, and after significant monetary investment in the area, residents were pushed out. Even though former residents were no longer part of the geographic place, they attempted to maintain connections to the neighborhood by continuing to publish a community newsletter (Brown, et al., 2011). Demonstrations of place attachment and maintenance of place identity continued when the actual place was gone. Hummon (1992), in what is the seminal qualitative, interpretivist social science exploration of place attachment in communities, recognizes connections to former places of residence as an extension of displacement. Experienced displacement can occur as a function of actual, physical displacement or it can be a feeling about an inhabited place that is connected to place alienation (Hummon, 1992). Hummon's (1992) sociological views on displacement can be found in fields outside sociology (Lewicka, 2011), and his work has been highly influential in urban development and city planning research.

According to community development researchers, there are many ways that an individual can build attachment to a community or a neighborhood. In work that is a precursor to McPhee and Zaug's (2000) development of the Four Flows, McMillan (1996) identified shared emotional connection, integration, influence, and membership at the elements that provide a feeling of community. Maintaining norms and exclusionary behavior is heavily featured in early writings about community attachments (Fried, 1963; Hummon, 1992). Institutions—both physical and cultural—within communities provide what Greene (2014) calls "socio-territorial bases" from which adherence to norms can be monitored (p. 105). Along with norm policing, August (2014) found that power accompanies individual and group social capital within communities and people are often

motivated to reinforce external hegemonic norms. Rather than encouraging cooperation and reaching across existing social boundaries, mixed income neighborhoods promote in-group affiliations and community divides (August, 2014; Greene, 2014). These ideas are important to the consideration of place attachment as functional (or not) in a rapidly changing community like the City of Ralston.

Place attachment is sometimes discussed as a phenomenon that can be divided into two parts: place attachment and place identity (Lewicka, 2011; Low & Altman, 1992). In that dyadic view, attachment develops with identity following behind with longer exposure or residency in a place (Shin & Yang, 2022). Studies using place attachment as a framework to analyze data often refer to the tripartite model of place attachment divided into emotional, functional, and social attachment (Lewicka, 2011). Emotional attachment is often equated with place identity which refers to a person's identification with or proud feelings about a place (Shin & Yang, 2022). Functional attachment is sometimes called place dependence and indicates just that; dependence on a place for what are viewed as essential life functions (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Social attachment is a more recent research subject and encompasses both the social bonding that happens in a place and the social capital that accompanies place attachment and engagement in a neighborhood or other personally significant place (Kyle et al., 2005). The formation of place attachment in any of these ways, though, is just one aspect of how the phenomenon influences human communication and behavior. Again, studies stretch the expanse of both fields of study and theoretical underpinnings. Human behavior studies in environmental sciences frequently use place attachment to understand willing behavioral change related to climate change and other environmental concerns (E.

Dickinson, 2011; Druschke, 2013; Lewicka, 2011). Mass communication and advertising studies have explored both attitudes and consumer behavior related to consumer decision-making influenced by place attachment (Dang & Weiss, 2021; Metzler, 2021; Styvén et al., 2020). Civic engagement is also studied as a function of place attachment (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Shin & Yang, 2022).

Multiple studies indicate a positive relationship between community engagement and place attachment (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Shin & Yang, 2022) while a few others indicate the inverse (de Mello, 2021). Many previous studies found a positive correlation between strong place attachment and civic participation in action (Hernández et al., 2007; Shin & Yang, 2022). Studies about political and community participation are of particular importance to outlining this research's purpose.

In communication, place attachment appears in studies about branding and tourism (G. Dickinson, 1997; Lewicka, 2011; Styvén et al., 2020) as well as place-based rhetorical analysis and criticism (Middleton, 2014; Rice et al., 2020). It does not, however, have an overwhelming presence in qualitative work about political communication (Dang & Weiss, 2021). One of the few recent articles focused on civic engagement through communication with political leaders takes a quantitative approach to show that the loss of a local newspaper can lead people to more partisan voting behaviors (Darr, et al., 2018). Darr, et al's (2018) study is salient to this work about the City of Ralston and provides an opening for qualitative work aimed at using memory studies to look for links to civic participation in struggling cities.

In 2011, Raymond, et al., recommended a move away from quantitative assessment of place attachment in a bid to humanize what the authors viewed as a very

human question. Among their recommendations was moving toward a participatory turn in favor of using interviews and direct observation of events as methodological choices (Raymond, et al., 2011). Oral histories have been used to measure place attachment in cities in the United States and Canada. Notable examples are found using Brandon, Manitoba, Canada (Ramsey, et al., 2016); Madison, Indiana (Paradis, 2001); and Virginia City, Nevada (Barnett, 2017) as locations. However, these previous works focus solely assess place attachment rather than combining the concept with others, and none take an organizational view of their chosen locations. Unique approaches to assessing place attachment appear in fields outside communication studies. A linguistics expert, Paul Reed, gathered what he termed "case studies" from residents of Appalachia to develop a rootedness scale based on language used in the recorded case studies (2020).

Using oral histories and Facebook posts as data sources along with qualitative methods is a way to fill an identified gap and further humanize research that centers on social issues. The lack of existing research that combines place attachment with organizational communication with a focus on agency provides a space for this work based in the City of Ralston.

City government and the city as an organization

Ralston, Nebraska, is governed under dual leadership including an appointed City Manager and an elected Mayor supported by an elected City Council. The City Manager serves at the pleasure of the City Council. The mayor serves at the pleasure of the voters. Distinction between the two is important as this research looks, in part, at the expressed willingness of citizens to communicate with their city leaders. Residents' chosen communication medium and point of access is worth consideration as a feature ripe for

use as an avenue of possible increased participation. City government and adaptation to changing economics has been explored at length in the context of environmental or climate issues and natural disaster response (Lesnikowski et al., 2021; Torabi et al., 2017). Communication about changing economic needs has been considered in the context of larger cities (Feldman & Quick, 2009) while this study proposes to further localize the study of organizational fluctuations in a small locale which is experiencing changing economic needs and demographics while considering the roles of memory and attachment on citizen communication.

This work is extremely localized, and, as mentioned earlier, makes no claims of being applicable in any time or place other than that where it occurs. It is a study of individual recollections and agency in Ralston, Nebraska in late 2022. However, those limitations do not negate the value of the work. There are many small communities with a combination of long-term and new residents that face similar challenges as Ralston: increased costs of operation, geographic limitations that effect tax revenues, and concurrently aging infrastructure and populations (Feldman & Quick, 2009). In those cases, the data gathered here, and the methods utilized could be reproduced by community or academic researchers to assist in building a picture of their community members' connections to and desires for the future of the locale while assessing the state of the community as an organization.

Collective memory / Social memory

Blair (2006) commented on communication scholarship and memory, "scholars have understood memory as significant to virtually all forms of communication practice" (p. 51). Memory as a utility in communication studies can be found throughout the gamut

of published papers, however, the field is dominated by rhetorical and quantitative methodologies. Quantitative methods have been used to view connection to the past within organizations (Etter & Nielsen, 2015), the connection between visual communication and collective memory (Dahmen, et al., 2019), and organizational culture displayed in news narratives (Motti & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016). These quantitative articles focus not on individuals within the organizations, but on the organizations themselves and the communications they generate and the impact of memories on that production.

In keeping with the emphasis on agency rather than systems in this research, I consider the writings of Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory as a segue to an explanation of social memory. Halbwachs (1992) wrote that memories do not exist with only one individual but are constructed and reconstructed as a connection to the past, present, and future. Embracing the idea of memory as a service to the present (Orianne & Eustache, 2023), collective memory is necessary for some histories—especially those emerging from monumental events that affect large numbers of individuals with a shared identity—to fully pass from one generation or one group to another. One example of this necessity is highlighted by research including the experiences of Jewish survivors of World War II (Bernard-Donals, 2005). The Jewish peoples' loss of collective memory was profound as the Holocaust not only killed people, but left future generations without the memories, oral histories, and identities of the victims. Halbwachs' notion of collective memory has given way to additional iterations of socially constructed and reconstructed memory. The three most often cited in research are social memory, collaborative memory, and shared memory (Orianne & Eustache, 2023).

Although memory is recognized as key to the study of communication, it has largely been the purview of rhetorical scholarship (Phillips, 2010). Notable examples of collective memory in the extant literature include writings about the rhetorical significance of the 9-11 memorial in New York City (Hess & Herbig, 2013), the importance of place in memorializing the fall of the Berlin Wall (Saunders, 2018), and the rhetorics of place in writing about Black Southern history (Medhurst, 2020). Aden, et al., (2009) recommend that approaches to studying collective memory expand beyond rhetoric to explore more fully "its processual and dynamic nature and...its largely emplaced character" (p.312).

Social scientists working on memory studies often use the term collective memory as a synonym for social memory (Orianne & Eustache, 2023), but the terms carry definitions that clearly delineate one from the other. According to Luhmann (2006), social memory is distinctly concerned with presuppositions of knowledge in communication. In other words, people who have shared knowledge stored as memories can leave things unsaid and still communicate about a topic. Extending the example used previously of the rhetorical significance of New York City's 9-11 memorial, discussions can be had about the memorial with people who remember the commemorated event without explaining the event and the aftermath. That information is already stored in memory by the conversationists.

Following Zelizer's (1995) urging to spend time and energy examining how memories are retained by groups or organizations rather than as the product of a process, this research places emphasis on the role of individuals in collective memory formation and maintenance. Sociologists Olick and Robbins (1998) urged fellows in their field to

separate collected memory from collective memory. Collected memory is derived from individuals' aggregate memories while collective memory can be viewed in the erection of monuments and the opening of museums as public manifestations of social memory.

Although the definitions offered by Olick and Robbins (1998) seem in competition, emplacement is key to understanding how the two are intertwined. Massey (1994) reminded us that places are evergreen. They are not static or, in some cases, even stationary. Rather, as Fried (1963) revealed, places and the emplaced elements of collective memory are dependent on the place even when the physical locale exists only as attached to individuals' memories. Emplacement is well-explored using rhetorical methods (Dickinson, et al., 2010), and there is considerable overlap between literature about place attachments and that concerning collective memory (Donofrio, 2010; Phillips, 2004). However, as mentioned previously in this paper, those sources concentrate analytical efforts on the performance of collective memory through building and maintaining public events, monuments, and facilities.

To position my work in this paper within the context of previous literature, I return to the ideas of Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs' writings changed over time with an original focus on collective memories related to specific events. However, in his later writings, Halbwachs had expanded his view of collective memory and suggested that the aggregated memories of individuals should be considered in the context of the emplaced memories held by a collective of individuals. In this research, collective memory is fully employed as social memory—those remembrances existing in relation to others and emplaced—and is explored in detail as support for the four flows model of CCO. From

this point forward in the writing, I use the term “social memory” in writing about methods, results, and discussion.

Research questions

Following the trail laid in the pages of the introduction and literature review portions of this paper led me to four research questions concerned with the presence of social memories as a conduit to place attachment which influences communication between actors in the organization of the City of Ralston. Using the Four Flows model of CCO as guidance, the following questions were formed:

RQ1: What elements of the Four Flows model of CCO are present in public posts on the City of Ralston Facebook page?

RQ2: How are place attachments expressed in the oral histories of some Ralston-affiliated individuals?

RQ3: How are social memories expressed in the oral histories of some Ralston-affiliated individuals?

RQ4: How do the social memories and place attachments expressed about the City of Ralston demonstrate the Four Flows model of CCO?

CHAPTER IV – METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative analysis of oral history and the accompanying qualitative coding analysis of a Facebook page is to understand the place attachments, social memory, and participation—or not—in the Four Flows model of CCO by some citizens in Ralston, NE. The following chapter offers detailed information on my research orientations, the selection of methodologies and participants, and data analysis while addressing potential ethical concerns of the work.

Ontology, epistemology, and qualitative approach

As a self-identified post-modernist scholar who adheres to social constructionist views of truth, qualitative methods are a natural fit for the types of questions I ask and the concepts within the communicative constitution of organization is a natural extension of my small "t" truth worldview. Glesne (2016) says that qualitative research is "a type of research that focuses on qualities, such as words or observations, that are difficult to quantify and that lend themselves to interpretation or deconstruction" (p. 299). Qualitative research allows for the construction of meaning as intentions, thoughts, perceptions, and feelings are communicated and interpreted by a researcher during the process of organizing and applying theory to the gathered data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Denzin & Lincoln (2018) go on to state that types of communication can come from many places—large and small—including events, groups of individuals, and individuals. In this study, the combination of research orientation and questions asked clearly calls for qualitative methods.

Viewing an oral history narrative analysis through the lenses of post-modernism as described by Dennis Mumby (1997), and social constructivism (Dombrowski, 1995;

Longo, 1998) is ideal as it "supports that subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning" (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p. 79). Mumby (1997) states that post-positivist views work to position communication as inherently political and sensemaking while post-modern scholars are "interested not in exchanging one power-knowledge regime for another but rather in demonstrating the possibilities and consequences of various articulations, disciplinary practices, and communication choices" (p. 18). For a study based on the recollections and personal public social media posts related to the constitution of organization within a small Midwest city, it is crucial that the participants' thoughts, opinions, and memories be analyzed and categorized for understanding to adhere to what Mumby (1997) refers to as a "vulnerable" participant and research process. Because the goal of the social constructivist view is to create a view of a place, situation, group, etc. based "as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 7), it is the most useful framing of a study of inherently political communication constituting a (potentially) faltering organization.

Narrative analysis

Analysis of oral history narratives "seeks ways to understand and represent experiences through the stories that individuals live and tell" (Lemley & Mitchell, 2012, p. 215). Although Lemley & Mitchell (2012) represent the overall process of narrative inquiry as a dialogic process requiring multiple contacts with participants, in this case it is specifically the analysis—not the data gathering—that is used as suggested by Boje (2001) in an examination of both the narrative and what is missing from the narratives in an organization.

Narrative analysis was completed using a five-step categorization system based on the emic process of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The steps used are, listening to the recorded oral histories, transcribing the oral histories, working with a partner coder to identify categories inductively, sorting and categorizing material within the categories, and selecting exemplars of the categories for inclusion in the research. This process facilitated the carefully constructed progression of listening, analyzing, and re-telling of stories that include and honor each participant's story including their values and meaning. In doing so, the analysis provided information about and attention to individual stories and situations while providing a broader view of the organizational structure they occupy (Nyseth & Fox, 2016).

Working with CCO as an underlying concept to support this research provides a unique opportunity to take a human-centered approach to organizational communication and constitution. The Four Flows model of CCO centers individual communications (Vasquez & Schoenborn, 2018) as does this research. Mertova & Webster (2020) emphasize the personal nature of narrative analysis as key to exploring complex issues through the recordings and examination of personal recollections. Their views align with those of Boje (2001) as he discusses the use of qualitative methods—including narrative analysis—as his preferred way to examine organizational communication. Given their agreement and the focus of this research, narrative analysis is the best way to answer the research questions posed.

Oral history as data

Oral histories are currently used in a broad swath of research concentrations. Computer science, especially studies focusing on computer-human interaction, use oral

histories as data (Nyhan et al., 2015). Psychology (Cohen, 2005), environmental studies (Hanson, 2016), and communication studies (Rice et al., 2020) all include venerable examples of using oral history as data. Current controversy over this type of data collection is outweighed by the arguments that oral histories are interviews which have the potential to connect researchers to on-the-ground data that potentially allows people from all backgrounds to participate and share their lived experiences and worldviews (Helgren, 2015).

Researchers do not often have access to all people with knowledge of a phenomenon or the ability to harness voices in inaccessible spaces. Oral history offers a window into new and unique places while preserving and honoring the unique memories of individuals (Helgren, 2015). It is, according to Thomson (2007), akin to gathering a close history or a "people's history" (p. 50) of an event. As mentioned previously, this exposure of individual messaging requires careful attention to privacy regardless of the publicly available nature of the recorded histories (Drozdzewski & Birdsall, 2019). In this research, as evidenced in the paper's opening chapter, I am using numbers rather than names to refer to participants. The reason for this is two-fold. First, although the recorded histories are publicly available, they can only be accessed by visiting the town of Ralston and making an appointment with the staff of the Baright Public Library. Second, because the town is identified by name and location in this paper, the residents who provided those histories may have statements exposed to a wider audience than they originally anticipated. Assuring identity protection for participants is a critical piece of research ethics, and, in this case, I am closely following the recommendations of communication scholars (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2010; Thomson, 2007).

Although there are some expressed concerns about the factual accuracy of oral history, the counterargument is that it is the expression of inaccurate history that should be interesting to scholars (Helgren, 2015). Rather than searching for Truth, the point of this study is to use a post-modernist and social constructionist approach and examine individual truths as relevant in their potential for civic engagement therefore facilitating organization. In this way, oral history is the ideal measurement of remembrances and recollections by the people closest to that data.

Shircliffe (2001), in a study using oral history to explore school segregation, writes that oral history must be viewed through the lens of nostalgia and considered as a reflection of a place and time. Proposed here, oral history is used in exactly that way. Oral histories from Ralston, NE are considered valuable data. However, they are most valuable as a representation of individual experiences and the selected and reconstructed memories of that person at that time.

Facebook posts as data

According to a 2024 study by the Pew Research Center, nearly 7 in 10 adults in the U.S. used Facebook and 70% of those users visit the site at least once per day with a whopping 49% of users accessing Facebook multiple times each day (Sidoti, et al., 2024) Facebook is the most-used social media network in the world and in the U.S. The ubiquitous nature of social media, but Facebook particularly, in people's lives, makes it a prime location for reaching people who might otherwise be unavailable (Treadwell & Davis, 2020). For this study, it provides information from people who did not participate in the oral history recordings, which broadens the view of the City of Ralston as an organization and provides an additional viewpoint from which to view CCO.

Data collection and participants

Oral History

With the assistance and guidance of library staff, twenty-six residents of Ralston, Nebraska recorded oral histories for use in the city library's 100-year anniversary celebration. The recordings are to be held at the Ralston Archives for future use, but they are currently at the Ralston Public Library in MP4 recording format. The participants in the oral history project were recruited by library staff using personal connections via email and phone call to people and open recruitment via printed flyers in the library and city hall as well as posts on the publicly available Facebook page of the public library. The recruitment produced a snowball sample of residents and former residents of Ralston, Nebraska with participants referring or recruiting one another or providing contact information for potential participants to library staff.

Recording took place from September 2022 to January 2023, and the final product consists of 26 interviews comprising nearly 57 hours of recorded personal history. The recordings are publicly available at the library, and transcriptions and the original recordings will be available at the Ralston Archives for access by anyone visiting the physical location in Ralston, Nebraska. At the time this dissertation is being written, the recordings are not available online, so I have taken extra measures to de-identify individual participants' words in the analysis of the oral history data. Doing so is in line with current participant privacy recommendations (Treadwell & Davis, 2020) while still meeting the study's needs.

Facebook

The City of Ralston's official, publicly available Facebook page was used as a data source to build a more complete picture of the city as an organization and to reach people who did not participate in the oral history recordings. Criterion sampling was used to identify data to be coded. First, criteria were developed by defining a time limit for the data to be gathered and the types of data to be gathered from the page (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To access data relevant to the research questions and to maintain some consistency of time frame while not exceeding the available resources and information available (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), I decided to use public posts (original messages that can include photos and written statements) on the City of Ralston Facebook page that included at least two replies (written comments on a post to the page). The presence of conversation is necessary to assess the communicative constitution of organization (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018), and so analysis was limited to those with multiple comments. To further meet the criterion, the posts could be made by any Facebook user including the City of Ralston page managers during the 12-month period from February 1, 2022, to January 31, 2023, which encompasses the time that the oral histories were recorded. Coordinating the time of the data production across multiple sources is consistent with recommendations by Denzin & Lincoln (2018) on ways to triangulate data. After defining the criterion, I manually located, copied, and pasted the 21 qualifying posts from Facebook into a word processing document for further analysis and processing.

Oral history data analysis

The oral history recordings were made by library staff using a password protected iPhone SE. Recordings were then uploaded to a publicly accessible library computer and saved as MP4 files. Because the files were not transcribed, I used a USB drive to download the audio files, and then uploaded them to Microsoft Word 365 for transcription. Microsoft's artificial intelligence powered transcription is new, and not guaranteed for accuracy. To check the accuracy, I listened to the recordings while checking and making corrections to the transcriptions. The transcriptions were about 90% accurate, and many of the missed words were not relevant to the meanings in the oral histories.

Coding

For coding and note-taking, I worked with a partner who holds an earned doctorate in communication studies. We worked on five transcriptions together to check for agreement in coding for both emergent categories and those related to the Four Flows, social memory, and place attachment. We followed a process recommended by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014), and analyzed available data "through classification of ideas, themes, topics, activities, types of people, and other categories relevant to the study" (p. 41). The first coding cycle, open coding, was marked by a focus on repeated phrases and words that formed patterns (Charmaz, 2014), which were then sorted and divided into short codes (Saldaña, 2016). Because this process had dual purposes—both emic and etic—patterns emerged that represented new ideas and those that supported the pre-defined categories from the theoretical background and research questions.

After comparing our work on the first coding cycle, we moved to second cycle coding, axial coding, and included all 26 transcribed interviews. Saldaña's (2016) coding manual says that second cycle coding looks for the codes that appear most often, "to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus" (p. 240). As we worked together to identify the most frequently appearing codes from the first cycle, we created overarching codes that encompassed multiple first cycle codes. Charmaz (2014) recommends using larger categories in axial coding to evaluate the utility of the first cycle codes and to move further into processing raw material into usable data. At this point, we could see that saturation had been reached in recording the oral histories. Reoccurring sentiments in the histories related to the theoretical basis for the study were apparent through repeated phrases and ideas throughout the transcriptions as we completed axial coding.

Finally, we engaged in thematic coding to further consolidate the identified data clusters into useful units for results reporting. Thematic coding aims to identify common themes and ideas during data consolidation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This thematic coding supported the overall narrative analysis to allow for a crystallized view of the participants' histories. The themes that emerged during this final coding step were used as categories for the exemplars and quotes that emerged from the deep reading process used during broad narrative analysis.

Three overarching themes related to the research questions were supported during this last step. They are expressions of place attachment (including sub-categorizations outlined in the results), expressions of social memory, and engagement in the Four Flows. Two additional meta categories emerged from the narrative analysis: expressions of loss and expressions of humor.

Facebook posts data analysis

Working again with the same coding partner, we began by reading the Facebook posts that were selected through the criterion sampling process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). There are few posts included in the sample—21 total posts—but they provide thick and rich data that reflects communication with the City of Ralston by individuals who did not take part in the oral history recordings. This diversity of views adds to the quality of the data gathered for the project (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010).

Coding

We engaged in a coding process that was like that used with the oral histories but with a few significant changes. Few Facebook posts qualified using the criterion sample, and they were similar in format and content. As such, they were coded using only an etic process concerned with information that fit into the categories of place attachment, social memory, and the Four Flows model of CCO. We preceded open coding with a careful reading of both the content of the original Facebook post which was posted by someone with City of Ralston Facebook page management access, and then the comments on each individual post. Because the number of posts was limited, we completed open coding on all 21 posts and developed a series of short codes (Saldaña, 2016) based on repeated words and post content to be used for subsequent rounds of coding.

We performed axial coding during the second cycle through the data and repeated this process together until we developed a cohesive collection of parent categories that we agreed upon. After this drawing of connections between the data from the open codes (Cresswell & Poth, 2018), we quickly reached saturation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) and could move onto third cycle thematic coding.

Thematic coding further consolidated codes from the second cycle coding to produce examples of the Four Flows model of CCO. Even with the small data set, evidence was available to demonstrate participation in self-structuring communication, membership negotiation communication, activity coordination communication, and institutional positioning communication. To facilitate data reporting, the posts were then sorted into categories by the post's purpose. Those categories are used to report results in the following pages.

CHAPTER V – QUALITATIVE CODING OF FACEBOOK POSTS RESULTS

In the following pages, results from the qualitative analysis of Facebook posts are categorized both by the type of post and the presence of the Four Flows This method of defining boundaries in the data is accepted and usual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and allows for organization that follows the categorization of data during the coding process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Because the data is limited to 21 Facebook posts on the City of Ralston's official Facebook page, and the analysis was conducted in an etic way using pre-defined units, that data is included first with the oral history data following in an additional chapter.

The Facebook portion of the results section provides information that responds to and begins to answer the first research question posed earlier in this paper; what elements of the Four Flows model of CCO are present in public posts on the City of Ralston Facebook page?

Facebook data in the Four Flows Model

Twenty-one Facebook posts fit into the criterion sample defined before data collection, and the sample provided data related to the Four Flows model of CCO within the City of Ralston. The Four Flows work concurrently—with at least two happening at once—to constitute community. To highlight the Four Flows in concert, this part of the results section will explore Facebook posts grouped by purpose. Of the 21 original posts used for data analysis, 14 were event related. Each one promoted, provided updates, or concluded community sponsored entertainment events. Of the remaining seven posts, one was a repost of a news article about the City of Ralston, two highlighted specific community members, and the final four posts related to city government functions and

requesting community input. In the following paragraphs, I proceed chronologically through the Facebook posts beginning with the reposted news article and ending with the government function posts.

Each Facebook post used in this section is cited in the References chapter of this paper. The posts are cited in-text using the date of the post. The posts are identified through textual description and post date in the following paragraphs.

Ralston raises Ukrainian flag on main street in solidarity

Institutional positioning was identified in every Facebook post analyzed. However, the most forward example is found in the city's repost of a local news station's story about the city displaying 80 Ukrainian flags on lampposts along Main Street and the major cross streets (City of Ralston, 2022, March 9). The flags and the resulting public posts demonstrated communication with people outside the organization. External stakeholders were clearly notified of the city's position on the conflict between Russian and Ukraine. Displaying the flags, although a popular activity on social media and beyond in March 2022, was a political statement outside the business of running a city.

The Facebook post by the City of Ralston generated 771 emoji reactions (all positive), 93 comments, and 24 shares of the post. The suggestion in the post that the feelings of "many Ralston residents" were represented by the hanging of the flags is a form of membership negotiation. One commenter reinforced the idea that there are shared values and identities at work by saying, "It makes sense that Independence City supports independence." In response to criticism of the flags, one impassioned commenter stated, "Man look at all this hate!! You should be ashamed of yourselves! The city of Ralston is practicing their constitutional right of freedom of speech! GO RAMS!!! " Stating and

restating shared values and the in-group identity as “residents of Ralston” serves to monitor membership within the organization.

In honor of

Two posts in the analysis celebrated a community member. The first is a thank you post to a person who fulfills multiple service roles in the Ralston community (City of Ralston, 2022, July 20). The original post says, “Thank you, Lon Bernth for presenting the City of Ralston with your beautiful art! Also, please join us in thanking him for everything he's done for Ralston Public Schools and the City of Ralston!” A photo of the honoree, the art he created, and the Ralston Mayor accompany the typed message. Understanding the honoree's role requires information not readily available to a person outside the membership of the organizations mentioned. Comments on the post reinforce the idea that some readers are aware of the person’s role in the community as they thank him for services mentioned and not mentioned. One commenter stated, “Thank you, Mr. Bernth, for all of your dedication to our schools and for your service to our country.” At no other point in the post is military service mentioned, but the commenter indicates that it has occurred and that they have knowledge of it. Membership negotiation is present in the post as is institutional positioning.

The second post is a happy birthday wish for a sitting City Council member (City of Ralston, 2022, August 3). The post—a photo of a man holding an auto mechanic-themed birthday cake—says, “Happy Birthday Councilman Preis! Thank you for everything you do for our great city!” The use of the phrase “our great city” exemplifies the forms of membership negotiation and institutional positioning seen throughout much

of the Facebook data by indicating a connection between posters or commenters and readers within the context of the City of Ralston.

Before, during, and after events

Events can be posted to Facebook in two ways. They can be shared as "Facebook Events," pages of information that are separate from the organization's main Facebook landing page, or they can be shared as part of a post to a main Facebook page. During the time chosen for Facebook post analysis, events hosted by or including the City of Ralston were posted on the city's page, not as an event page. Fourteen of the 21 posts that met the criterion sample requirements are event focused. They provide information before, during, and after events. To facilitate reporting of the findings related to event posts, they are further categorized by the event in the post. Four of the posts are about Ralston's annual Independence Day celebration, four are about Yoga on the Green, two are about food centered events, two are about the Fall Family Festival, and the final two are about the annual Holiday Magic celebration.

Independence Day. Ralston's Independence Day celebration has occurred every year since 1960. It includes a parade, activities at the fire station, a pie baking contest, a quilt show, multiple live bands, many food vendors, and a fireworks show that always happens on July 4. The Ralston Mayor's most recent estimate is that more than 60,000 people (personal communication, 2023) descend upon the tiny city to enjoy the festivities. Independence Day is Ralston's biggest draw for tourism and tourist dollars.

In 2022, at the time of the Facebook posts examined here, the city was celebrating its 62nd annual Independence Day celebration. On June 17, 2022, the city posted an official Independence Day celebration schedule of events. This self-structuring

communication reinforces the expected participation for varied events and defines the events in which individuals are invited to participate. In response, several members of the Ralston community—or interested outsiders—responded with questions about the appropriateness of events for children and clarification about the event timeline. One community member asked, “Is there any music to the show?” while another queried about the closure of streets for the parade. No answers were posted by the City of Ralston page managers on this post. Another post around the same time received similar treatment with no official responses to questions.

A self-structuring post stating the allowable time for staking out a parade spot—after 6pm the evening before the parade—generated comments ranging from doubt about the availability of spots to the need of homeowners to mow their lawns before blankets were set out on them (City of Ralston, 2022, June 28). This type of self-structuring communication by the organization was met with responses of activity coordination by community members. The community member who wrote “No kidding! So that we can get our lawn mowed!” was engaging in activity coordination communication. They knew they would need to mow their lawn before blankets were placed on it at a time defined by the city in anticipation of the following morning's parade.

Yoga on the Green. Four posts dedicated to a city-run program called, “Yoga on the Green,” two about food-related events, and two about the Fall Family Festival are all similar in format and content to the posts about other events. Each of these events were offered in partnership with other local organizations and in a place within the city but not owned by the city.

The yoga events featured instructors from a local fitness facility at no cost and was open to anyone who wanted to join (City of Ralston, 2022, September 5; September 8, September 15, & October 26). Details in the original posts included links to the fitness facility's Facebook page and to the location's Facebook page. The food-related and Fall Family Festival (City of Ralston, 2022, October 6 & 11) events—including a food truck festival and a concert and food truck event—were offered in conjunction with the local Chamber of Commerce (City of Ralston, 2022, July 3 & August 14). In addition to the self-structuring posts by the city including directions to the food trucks, a map of where each truck would be parked, and parking instructions, institutional positioning and activity coordination were achieved through links to the musicians' Facebook pages and multiple food trucks' pages. Connecting multiple entities in the posts and defining which organization was responsible for which functions is one example of institutional positioning while delineating which individuals were running distinct parts of the events and who could be contacted for more information is one form of activity coordination. Institutional positioning was present in each of the posts.

Membership negotiation communication is present in the comments on the yoga posts in the form of linking people's profiles in comments as an invitation to the event and in comments like, "What a beautiful morning for outdoor yoga! I enjoyed it very much!" This type of comment is a way for people to make clear their membership status in the organization. Similar "I was there" comments flooded the Fall Family Festival event posts following the event. People were eager to be known as part of the event and, by extension, the organization.

Holiday Magic. The final two event posts are about the annual Christmas celebration in Ralston (City of Ralston, 2022, November 25 & November 27). The event is called Holiday Magic, but it is clearly focused on elements associated with Christmas in the Midwestern U.S. The day includes a visit from Santa, horse and carriage rides through city streets, a massive winter village display that consumes most of the open space in the city library, snacks and drinks, a Christmas Tree lighting, and a Nativity scene on the lawn of City Hall. The analyzed posts include one promoting the event and one immediately at the conclusion of the event.

The promotional post included a photo of a detailed event schedule that also included the logos of event partners. As seen in previously mentioned posts, the schedule is a form of self-structuring communication, and the partner logos work similarly to linking Facebook profiles as a form of activity coordination and institutional positioning. Comments on the post requested additional information about the event which reinforces the self-structuring of the original post.

After the event, the city page manager posted a photo of Santa and the Ralston Mayor in front of the lighted Christmas tree. The text accompanying the photo performed membership negotiation functions by asking people to post photos showing that they attended the event. The text read,

> Happy Holidays Ralston! What a great turnout tonight! It was great to see everyone. We'd love to see your pictures! Please post in comments!
>
> Thank-you to Ralston's Holiday Magic sponsors! Hy-Vee, First Interstate Bank, Don & Ron's CARSTAR Collision

In response, one person commented, “What a wonderful night, just a nip in the air to remind us that Christmas is just around the corner but not cold enough to keep you at home. Thank you all for such a wonderful evening.” Others posted photos showing friends and family at the event. All the comments serve as membership negotiation by defining in-groups.

City functions and requesting input

The remaining four posts, although grouped under this heading and including information that matches up with the Four Flows in similar ways, are distinct for notable reasons. Examples of all Four Flows exist in this category. The first post chronologically was a March 2022 City Council meeting announcement (City of Ralston, 2022, February 25). Activity coordination is present in the meeting announcement to communicate shared goals and mutual understanding. Self-structuring communication exists in the creation of the agenda, scheduling the meeting, and the construction of an outline for the meeting.

Responses to the City Council meeting post engaged in activity coordination by requesting action from the city. One commenter stated,

> Off the subject but…Will the City of Ralston have a St. Patrick’s Day pub crawl this year? Bellevue has listed their pub crawl (on some of the specific bar pages) already. Just trying to make plans and was hoping for a Ralston pub crawl!

A person with administrative access to the City of Ralston Facebook page responded with an institutional position by saying, “<Name> check with the Ralston Area Chamber of Commerce. They would be the organization sponsoring such an event. Thank you.”

Another commenter seized the moment to further define roles and responsibilities by saying,

> Ralston needs to do something about traffic flow on the main drag from 72nd & Main to 84th & Q. Second time in less than a year someone has had cars ending up in their yards. We have lucked out so far that the kids haven't been hit!!

This comment serves multiple purposes for the organization. It provides self-structuring by reinforcing the function of the organization in road maintenance and planning. It also uses an information channel of communication (Facebook) to comment on an upcoming formal channel (the City Council meeting) while attempting to coordinate activity on an issue in the city.

Parks remodel. Next, I identify the Four Flows in two posts related to redesigning and revamping the city's eight existing parks including baseball and softball fields (City of Ralston, 2022, September 19; City of Ralston, 2023, January 31). The first post included a link to a survey assessing citizens' preferences about park renovations. The post included a photo of one of Ralston's parks and the following text

> Help us improve our parks! Click here for survey: <survey link>
>
> Ralston Residents & Supporters
>
> Our parks are community gems. They are a big contributor to Ralston's high quality of life. We want Ralston parks to continue to be among the best in the Metro. That's why the city is planning new investments in our parks to keep them fresh and fun. But we need to hear from you first.

> What do you want to see in Ralston's parks? What is going well now? What can be improved? And what can we do to provide better recreational opportunities for our residents?
>
> Please take a few minutes and fill out our park survey.
>
> Your opinion is critical toward ensuring that the City's investments reflect our community's preferences.

The above text and the following from the second parks renovation-related post, "Don't forget this Thursday is the open house for the parks master plan! Please attend and make your voice heard!" includes all Four Flows. Posting on the official city Facebook page is a public relations effort that includes institutional positioning. The post is self-structuring in the formal request for community members' input while the same request serves as membership negotiation by encouraging a sense of belonging and attempting to foster connection to the city as an organization. It also encourages activity coordination by using formal (the survey) and informal (Facebook) communication channels to facilitate collaboration. Interestingly, the city's Facebook page manager limited the comments on the survey post after I saved and analyzed it for this research. As such, I eliminated discussion of the comments because they are no longer publicly available.

Let it snow. Finally, I analyzed a post about snow removal and declaration of snow emergencies (City of Ralston, 2023, January 18). In Nebraska, snow is part of every winter, and people have a lot to say about snow removal and snow emergencies. The final post analyzed is interesting because it is overwhelmingly positive. The initial post contained some elements of an apology, but it retained purpose as self-structuring by defining rules and procedures, membership negotiation by using in-group phrasing (our

snow team) in the text, and activity coordination by defining who is doing what and when it will happen. The original text reads as follows:

> Snow Alert and Emergency
>
> A major snowstorm is forecasted for the Metro area. The City's snow clearance will be impacted by unforeseen personnel illnesses and an equipment issue. We urge Ralston residents to be patient as snow clearance may take longer than normal. Our snow team does a great job but is under-resourced for this storm.
>
> An emergency parking declaration may be issued later today. If parking is banned due to snow, please remember we provide snow emergency parking at Hillcrest Landing, 75th & Main Street.

For this post, I chose to include all the comments because they clearly show a sense of identity associated with the organization and institutional positioning. The comments proceed in the following order:

1. Thanks for the heads-up! Hope our crews working stay safe, please! We appreciate you!
2. The snowplows have been by my house three times already. I'm always happy with the cleanup.
3. I saw the salt truck go past already. Thank you!!!
4. Be safe out there guys. Thanks
5. Stay safe! Ralston always does a great job…thank you!
6. Thanks for the heads up!

7. Thanks for the heads up! You always do such a great job that we don't realize the roads are that bad, then we get out of city limits and there is a clear difference! Hope our maintenance folks get back to feeling well soon.

I chose to include the comments on the snow removal post because they align with the data found in the narrative analysis of the oral histories which is detailed in the coming two chapters. Each communicates support of and identification with the community of Ralston. To conclude the analysis of Facebook posts on the official City of Ralston page, I return to the research question explored here. What elements of the Four Flows model of CCO are present in public posts on the City of Ralston Facebook page? According to the qualitative analysis of Facebook posts detailed in the previous pages, the answer to that question is: all of them.

Although the data reported in this section is supportive of the first research question, there are connections yet to be made with the second, third, and fourth questions and between the set of Facebook data and the oral history data. The following chapters accomplish those goals. First, I report the data from the narrative analysis of oral histories, and finally, everything will coalesce in the final discussion and conclusion chapters.

CHAPTER VI – NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF ORAL HISTORIES RESULTS

The twenty-six oral history recordings collected by Baright Public Library staff provided a rich data tapestry from which to draw individual and interwoven threads. To facilitate a full explanation of the data, I used categories—both inductive and deductive—that emerged during analysis and then reorganized them by research question. The categories and sub-categories below including meaningful exemplars from the oral histories. Some of the exemplars have been edited to remove filler words or pauses to enhance clarity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), but they remain true to the meaning of the speaker. The oral histories are identified by throughout the following narrative by numbers assigned chronologically by the date of recording (oral history one was the earliest recording and 26 was the latest). This section begins with the second research question as the first was answered in the previous section about Facebook data.

RQ2: How are place attachments expressed in the oral histories of some Ralston-affiliated individuals?

"Ralston used to be the place to be. I suppose in some ways it still is."

-Baright Public Library, Oral History 16, 2022

Expressions of emotional attachment to the City of Ralston are clear throughout the oral histories. The emergent sub-categories within place attachment were like those identified by Hummon (1992). Hummon (1992) categorized the expressed sentiments of people in Worcester, Massachusetts into the following: ideological rootedness, everyday rootedness, place alienation, relativity, and uncommitted placelessness. When analyzing the histories, I found no evidence of uncommitted placelessness or relativity, which will be discussed as a weakness at the close of this narrative. However, the emergent

categories closely resembled Hummon's (1992) other three categories. When my partner coder and I performed data analysis, we identified the following five parent categories: humor, loss, belief in community, generational connection, and disconnection. Within the categorization, humor and grief hold a place above the others.

Humor and loss

Nearly all the oral histories contained humor and loss as demonstrations of place attachment. The presence of humor and loss in so many places throughout the data set defined them as meta categories. In the second oral history, the speaker talked extensively about the joys of living in Ralston as a young person. In the example below, the speaker's mirth and loss are both evident in the overall amusement expressed in the words of the story and the expressions about things being "different" now.

> OK, one other thing that's kind of fun. There used to be a trestle. You know, if you just go down where the railroad tracks are, there used to be a trestle over them. OK. And as kids, we would always, I mean, there were no restrictions when we were kids. We'd go down and play at the tracks and the word was never go on the trestle. Adults would say, "never go by the trestle and stay away from the tracks." Well, don't tell a kid those things! So, we went down there, and we met a bum. His name was something Louie, I think. Oh gosh, I can't remember his name! He had a sort of hole in the back of the hill. It was just a little place, and he had a little stove type thing. King Louie, I think that's what it was. But anyway, we would sneak him food. It used to make my mom mad because she thought giving us baloney sandwiches was a real treat, but we always asked for more because we sneaked our baloney sandwiches down to him. He would never let us

get close to him. No, no, no, no. And so, he put a little tin can out and we set the sandwiches on the tin can. Yeah, he was something, and sometimes he'd be gone for weeks at a time. But then he would come back. But we never messed his stuff up ever because the story went that if you saw a bum, they'll get you. And so, we were kind of afraid the first time we saw him, but he never messed with anyone. Years later, I remember telling my mom about King Louie. I thought she was going to have a stroke. As we would now if we knew our kids were playing with bums. Things are different now. We ran and that's what every kid did. It's different now.

The railroad trestle is featured in a story from another long-time Ralston resident in oral history four. Humor and loss are present in this story, too as the speaker gaily relays the story about watermelon theft and then the mention of the sister's moving away and dying.

My sister and her best friend would steal watermelons from Baker's—it used to be right there where Abraham's is now. The two of them would steal watermelons and sit on the railroad trestle that used to be down here. They'd spit the seeds at the cars coming back through town. Friend's dad was on City Council at the time. Got away with everything. My sister was a tomboy. She'd break horses working with a guy had a corral over there where the buildings are by the tracks. She moved out west away from here. She died when she was only 55.

Humor and loss, present in every recorded oral history, were identified by my partner coder and I as meta categories because they appeared so often and seemed to operate independently from the other identified categories. They were not simply

overlapping categories, although we did see that throughout the histories, but supported the other categories while existing on their own merit.

Belief in community

Although more specific, this category is like Hummon's (1992) ideological rootedness. Hummon's category covers a broader scope of ideologies, but the attachment we observed in Ralston was firmly rooted in a belief in community. That belief took multiple forms. Some participants talked about their belief in Ralston's potential as a community while others expressed a belief in the overall power of being part of a community.

The words of the speaker in Oral History 17 speak to Ralston's particular appeal as a community and the belief that the community can change a bit and maintain a desirable community feeling.

> I came to Ralston when I got married. I was from a small town—the same small town as Mayor Don Groesser—and I didn't want to go to Omaha. It was terrifying! So, I ended up in Ralston. The downtown here could be rebuilt to look like other areas in Omaha. Some we're in competition with now—Blackstone and Benson—but we could be better competition. Our main street doesn't look like Omaha or Millard. We're small. That gives Ralston a corner on being a great, small community. People want to be here.

The participant's words reflect a belief in the community as different from those surrounding it and in the possibilities available to people in a small town like Ralston.

Being part of a community within Ralston was discussed by several speakers. Each brought a unique view on what that community might be. Oral histories 8 and 19

contain examples of community membership and how it connects them to community. The speaker in oral history 8 stated, “I started my business in Hillcrest Landing. It was successful because I worked hard but also the community. Ralston was where I came from. I felt supported as a hometown girl.” Oral history 19 elaborated on the sentiments offered in the previous quote with a melancholy twist.

> We moved here for my husband’s job with two little boys. I got involved at the school, I was a teacher before I married and thought that was a way to meet people. Ralston was a small town and wasn’t connected to Omaha like now. Volunteering at school led to making friends with other moms. Not the life I thought I would have but moms introduced me to other people, and I found ways to be part of the community.

This belief in community is reflected in many of the oral histories. It is part of participants’ attachment to the City of Ralston and helps the community organize in ways that meet the requirements of its inhabitants.

Generational connection

The nature of oral histories collected by the local public library in connection with the local archives organization and as a memorial to the library’s centennial celebration means that generational connections were primary and frequent subjects in the data. However, that doesn’t negate the importance of this category to the research in this paper. Hummon’s (1992) typology uses the term everyday rootedness to describe the ways in which people rely on their community through the motions of their daily lives. That type of reliance on community is seen in this category as speakers talked about the ways their

daily family life has been influenced by being part of the Ralston community for generations.

Oral history 19—the longest recording in the group at nearly four hours—was a rich source of information about generational connection going forward rather than looking back into history.

> They are why I'm able to stay here. In my home. In Ralston. My boys live here and most of their kids and grandkids. I have two granddaughters in their 40s! Well, they're not in Ralston, but close. Homes don't come up for sale here. Between the boys and the kids, someone stops by twice a day to check on me. Sometimes they stay to eat. Sometimes they have to go.

Another participant, in oral history 12, talked about having her children and grandchildren in the Ralston area. She is a former teacher whose husband—a long-time employee of the Ralston Public Schools—recently died. The loss affected her greatly, and she mentioned that she was especially grateful to remain connected to the local school systems through her son's position as a school principal. Maintaining connections to the city and its entities was important to many of the oral history participants.

Generational connection is a category that moves both forward and back. Some of the historical remembrances were especially interesting in the context of the community as an organization. Oral history 20 was recorded by a life-long resident of Ralston with family history extending to the early stages of the city.

> My mom moved here when she was around four or five, and she's also lived in the same block her whole life. When they came, there was land and not any houses, just lots of land and stuff. So, my grandfather--which he ended up being a mayor

also of the city—he bought multiple pieces of property in that area. Now this was before there was a lot of roads, cement roads and stuff. My mom had said that when my dad and her got married. It was around the time that they were going to start concreting the streets and then you would the homeowner would have to pay a certain portion of that to make that happen. My grandfather had to sell off some of the pieces of property. But it was at the time that my parents were married. And so, he sold. He asked them which piece of property they would like to have in that area. They took the piece of property that her house or their house is currently located at. Then he had to end up selling other pieces because my, our house and my grandparents' house is on the corner. So, then you got dinged twice because you were on the corner of 80th, so you paid for 80th Street, but he was there also on Main Street, right, and so you paid for it too. And our lot, actually, is a corner lot and an extra lot. So, we have two lots right next to each other, and he had two lots right next to each other. He kept an extra lot.

Myriad quotes about generational connection and the impact that has on the current daily lives of participants are available within the oral histories. Just a few were included here as examples of that category of connections.

Disconnection

Described by Hummon (1992) as place alienation, the category of disconnection encompasses expressions about remaining in Ralston but feeling disconnected in some way(s) or expressions about actual separation from the city. There are two especially notable oral histories because they mentioned feeling disconnected even though the

speakers remain in Ralston as active community members. The first, in oral history 20, said this:

> Growing up here wasn't all a bed of roses. My parents had some conflicts with people in the community. They didn't like the way some things were done officially. So, they were treated bad. I was just a kid, but they should be ashamed of the way they treated me too. Years later here I am again. I must like it here because I keep coming back. Those memories make it hard sometimes.

Oral history 24 included frustration with community:

> I want entrepreneurial minded people to see Ralston as a good opportunity. People are upset about any little change. So limiting. There's a balance somewhere between politics and progress and we just can't seem to find it here. It's like we need new people to come in and some of the old ones to go. I want new people to see Ralston as a place for opening small businesses or living. I would love to see affordable apartments in town but that's a very unpopular opinion.

Several of the oral history participants were one step removed from the community. Two participants lived in Ralston as children and moved to another location in the Omaha metropolitan area. Three participants had never lived within the city, but they worked for a city entity through multiple decades. Oral history 13 contained a sense of loss and disconnection from the community that the speaker called "home" as a child.

> A year ago, I almost bought my parents old house and missed the opportunity, but I've always wanted to get a place back in old town Ralston. I just love old town Ralston and unfortunately, like everything else, it is way different now than it was when I was growing up. There's a lot of old timer awesome people I still talk to,

some that don't live here, some that do, and nobody seems to really enjoy it as much as they used to anymore. But that's the way everything goes. You know, it's not the 60s to 70s and 80s anymore.

When coding the oral histories for expressions of place attachment, I found overlap between not only the parent categories developed during coding, but also with Hummon's (1992) typology of community attachment, and the two identified meta categories of humor and loss. Only a few examples were included here for each category as there are similarities between the expressions of place attachment and of social memories. In answering the second research question, how are place attachments expressed in the oral histories of some Ralston-affiliated individuals, five categories were defined through careful analysis of the oral history data: humor, loss, belief in community, generational connection, and disconnection. To explore the connections more fully between place attachment and social memory, I move now to the third research question which looks specifically for instances of social memory expression within the recorded histories.

RQ3: How are social memories expressed in the oral histories of some Ralston-affiliated individuals?

In this research, collective memory is fully employed as emplaced social memory—those remembrances existing in relation to others and related to the City of Ralston. Social memories examined in relation to research question three are selected because they focus on connection to others or are mentioned in more than one oral history and center on the city as part of the memory. As suspected, social memories are present throughout the recollections of Ralston-affiliated individuals. Several examples

are included below with contextual details offered in paragraphs before and after oral history quotes.

Oral history 13 is packed with social memories. The participant's remembrances focused on connections with others and growing up in a fondly remembered City of Ralston.

> Ralston was great. It was everything you see and think of, like in TV shows and movies of like the 70s and how much fun stuff was like. That's what I remember it being like. My dad used to have big New Year's parties and they would have off duty officers like go to the liquor store and get liquor and then deliver it. I think three times there might have even been some on duty officers that did that, and it was fun. The fire department back then was just a massive family. They, I mean I, lived at the fire hall. I was there just as much, if not more than I was my house. I would get out of school. Go directly there. If my mom wasn't picking me up like I would have friends' parents dropped me off and as they just knew, everybody was going to be at the fire department because there was a big hall in the back where there was a bar and a pool table, so it was like their own private little club. But it was like one big, massive family the fire department back there. Husker Saturdays, we were always at one of the firemen's houses and there would there be, you know, 15 firemen, their wives, kids running around. Then everybody would be cooking all day long. There was a guy named Scott who was also on the fire department that had a big smoker, and he would set the smoker up actually in the alleyway, between Maria's and the fire hall and smoke stuff all day long. It was cool, it was great. And then at night, whoever didn't show up for the party,

their house would get toilet papered or their driveway might get blocked by trash bags full of leaves or something, so like it was always something fun. I loved it.

Another oral history participant (number five) talked about favorite yearly events arranged by the local Jaycees group. Social memory is on display here as both memories related to interpersonal connections and memories that are shared with others within an organization.

> So many events. Hard to say. Always love the Easter egg hunt. And then also it was fun to watch some of the kids when we did the athletic, the sporting competitions. Those are also up there with my favorites because there's this one little boy. He's not little anymore. He might be in his 30s. Isn't it funny how that happened? Well, probably 20s. But anyway, His mom brought him to every single thing, and he won so many times our level. So, then he would get to go wherever the state event was, and so then the state organization for Jaycees would host a state level competition for all the local winners. And this little guy, his mom would take him. Single mom. She would take him all the time to wherever I mean, Sydney, Scottsbluff, whatever. And just this last 4th of July, his mom was there to participate in the picnic, and I was like, Oh my gosh. Hi. How are you? And she's like, I've got to show you a picture of my son. And I'm like, oh, that'd be lovely. So, here's the son and his girlfriend. He's getting his masters. He's in Chicago. I'm like, oh, my gosh, you know he looks so dapper, and all grown up and everything you know. And I'm just like, oh, my gosh, William, I can't believe he's all grown up. She said, you remembered his name. I'm like, oh, yeah, I wouldn't forget it. And I said, well, my husband's right over there. You've got to

> go show him. And she says, oh, I already did. He knew his name, too. I think what was cool about the youth events was that sometimes we got to know the families of the people and so I really enjoyed that part.

Three events emerged repeatedly in the oral histories. They are categorized below to help organize the exemplars. The 1975 tornado, the Ralston arena, and various Independence Day celebrations are included as sub-categories. Each of them includes memories that are shared with others by virtue of a major event and memories that are built on connections with others.

The 1975 tornado

The speaker in oral history 16 tells a story about her mother being at the library during the tornado while her father was at a local horse racetrack called Aksarben. The memories shared in this passage are connected to those shared in the following story by another participant. This is a good example of the nature of social memory. Our social memories connect us to or are connected through others.

> It was like 4:30-ish in the afternoon. This when this tornado happened. The children were there for afternoon story hour. She was a children's librarian and the only person in the library with probably, I don't know, 50 children. They had to stay there. No one could leave until they got the all clear. Bob came down from up the street to let her know that it was over. My brother was there. He'd just come home from work and on his motorcycle! Anyway, their house was not destroyed by any means, but there used to be a strip of houses on 84th. There's just like 1-2 maybe standing now. My dad was at Aksarben when he heard on the radio that all the houses and the middle school and Ralston were destroyed. So, he

had no idea if he had a house. He couldn't get out. They locked everyone in at Aksarben because the horse races were going on at that time. I don't know what time he finally did get home. Ralston Bank had a lot of damage. There was money floating all over the place. I assume the safety deposit boxes were all still standing. There was money floating all around and they deputized some of the long time up standing citizens and so they could go down there and get things right.

Another participant—in oral history 3—talks about the librarian who was "stuck with the kids" during the tornado. It is a third or fourth-hand account of the situation described by the previous speaker. Social memories are included here by the mention of shared community experiences (kids going to story hour and the tornado) and the necessity of others to the memory's formation and retention.

All the kids would go to the library after school. Not the school library. The city library. It was over there at that time. And the librarian, she was the only adult in the library that day. She had all those kids there when the sirens went off. She couldn't let them leave. She was stuck with the kids from 4:00 in the afternoon until probably 7:30 when someone could get there to say it was safe to go. The kids were scared and hungry. They were crying. She kept them all safe.

Overlap present in the two remembrances is striking as are the differences. Only oral history 16 mentions money floating all over from the Ralston Bank, but the librarian keeping children in the facility until they could go home safely proved memorable for multiple people. The 1975 tornado was frightening and resulted in challenges for the organization. It is not surprising that people have social memories related to the event.

Approval and construction of the Ralston arena was initially met with overwhelming support, but the financial strain of the arena has changed the way some residents view the place and the processes surrounding it. Conflicting and conflicted views about the arena are expressed throughout the oral histories. A few of those recollections are included next.

The Ralston arena

Chapter II in this document describes the controversy, financial difficulties, and turmoil related to the arena built in and with funding from the City of Ralston. The facility and associated conflict could be researched in many ways and could be the subject of several dissertations. In this section on social memory, my goal is to show the similarities and differences in memories that involve connections with others within a place. Memory and current feelings about the arena seem as varied as is humanly possible, and that is on display here.

Oral history five provides details about the speaker's current arena related thoughts. Social memory is present in the mention of the community, shared knowledge of the arena, and in an expressed understanding of other community members' thoughts about the arena.

> I try to participate with everything that that happens and like I know there's a lot of opposition to our arena, but we try to go to a lot of things there and take advantage of it. I feel like I own a piece of that, and I can help make it be a success. If everybody who lived here and was paying taxes to pay for it would go to the things there, we'd be doing pretty good. And so, I've even in its hardest

times, have always been a proponent and it's like it's here. It's not going away. So, we need to support it.

In contrast to the supportive stance in the preceding quote, questioning comments emerged in oral history four with the same bases for the social memories shared in the following passage.

> The arena. I don't know about that. It seemed like a good idea when we were talking about it. Looking at it now, maybe we got fooled. It was sold as one thing as a price and ended up being another thing at a different price. It just keeps taking money from us. Some people are starting to ask when we cut it off.

Within the same social memory framework, oral history 21 mentions that change is difficult and frames the arena as a challenge rather than a problem to shed. The connection between community and memory is clear below.

> We agreed that we need development. We sat in meetings and talked. People showed up and gave opinions. I remember when someone asked about annexation and the answer was that debt would make Omaha not interested. I think that's good, too. Ralston has a way of doing things that works for the city. We need to keep talking as a community. One problem is not the end of new things. Some people just don't want change.

Oral history 26 had a different view of the entire process of the arena, remembering it as a proud accomplishment and an achievement. Social memory as a connection to others and to the community, however, remains.

> Why don't we build an arena? And I said, well, it sounds good to me. How do we do it? You know? And so, we kept talking and putting it together and putting

> plans together. And then the owner of the Lancers said, well, let's work together and we can make this happen. And all of a sudden, you know, the whole thing started and then it would fall apart. And so, I said, ok, well, just don't do it. But then, wait a minute. If we did this, we could do that. And you know, we actually got the legislature to pass a bill to give us a turn back tax for 20 years, $50 million of it. And so, we went ahead and build it. And so right now the all the people that go there and all the people within a 600-yard radius are paying for that. The taxpayers are paying for that, which is beautiful.

Social memories about the Ralston arena are largely contingent on the place the person occupied in the process. It is possible that people with official positions are motivated to paint it positively while the average homeowner or resident is less hesitant to celebrate the facility or the process. Similar stratification is not observed in quotes surrounding the city's Independence Day celebrations. That event is universally supported by the group of people who participated in the oral history interviews.

Independence Day

Independence Day is the City of Ralston's largest tourism event, and it requires volunteers from the community to start planning for the next event as soon as the current year's celebration ends. Three paid city staff—each of whom have many other duties—are involved in the planning in partial cooperation with the local Chamber of Commerce, and all other involved parties are volunteers. Long-time residents of the event have strong feelings and vivid social memories of celebrations past. The speaker in oral history 10 is no exception.

> Patriotic. I mean, first of all, we're patriotic. I remember that the city attorney at one time, really got it cleared up through the City Council and everything. I don't know if it was legalese or not, but he said, this is Independence City and he also said, we don't celebrate the 4th of July, we celebrate Independence Day here. So, for as long as we've lived here, the 4th of July was Independence Day. You know, Independence Day in Ralston is something to behold, and you probably hear that all the time, but they go up several steps further and they will do things to honor any of the patriots, and they also honor any of the firefighters, the police. They just rally around. They're heroes and we have a lot of heroes here in Ralston.

Family and community connections loom large in many participants' Independence Day memories. Specifically, Oral history 9 includes the following in the form of interconnected memory:

> Independence Day is bigger for my family than Christmas. Probably because we always had a couple kegs of beer. We're drinkers. The 4th of July is a big thing for my family and the City of Ralston. Yeah. Independence City, they call it. In 2017, we had two canopies down here. I had nieces that they were born in Tennessee and lived in Portland and Vancouver and Toronto, and they came back for it.

Social memories can be found throughout the oral history data analyzed for this project. Clearly, Ralston-affiliated people find joy in their experiences with the city, but they are also comfortable questioning the actions of officials. Social memories connect us to the people we encounter in the places we find them. Ralston and these oral history participants give testimony to that phenomenon. The previous few pages serve as a

response to the third research question, how are social memories expressed in the oral histories of some Ralston-affiliated individuals, and this collected data allows me to move toward answering the fourth and final research question.

RQ4: How do the social memories and place attachments expressed about the City of Ralston demonstrate the Four Flows model of CCO?

To facilitate the explanation of the Four Flows in the social memories and place attachments of Ralston-affiliated individuals, this section is divided by the four flows (membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning) with exemplars in each that include both social memory and place attachment. The conceptualization of community as organization becomes clearer throughout this section and fully coalesces in the following discussion.

Membership negotiation

Recollections containing expressions of place attachment and social memory that also exemplify membership negotiation are abundant in the oral histories. Viewing the City of Ralston as an organization, indications of membership negotiation include welcoming people, keeping them out, and using terms like “we” and “our” in conversation about organization related experiences. Examples of this type of communication from three oral histories are below beginning with a nostalgic memory of attending school in the city from oral history 11.

> I went to public school starting in 9th grade. My parents were very involved with Saint Gerald’s parish in Ralston, so I went to St. Gerald’s school starting in kindergarten. When we got to high school, the public school kids asked us, did the nuns hit you with sticks and stuff? Why are you so quiet? I don’t want to sound

like a jerk, but public school was a shock for us from St. Gerald's. It was, I don't want to say chaotic, but we came from a tiny Catholic school to what felt like a giant public school. It took us a while to fit in.

Oral history one contained the following quotes that show concurrent instances of social memory, place attachment, and expressions of membership negotiation.

I graduated from Ralston High School. I graduated in 1972. Our class was actually the first class that went through four years at the new high school, so it was all four years we were over there. So, we were the first class to go all four years. We weren't the first class to graduate from there, but the first ones all the way through.

Not all applicable memories revolved around school experiences. The speaker in oral history 24 talked about work experiences at a Ralston restaurant that helped her feel a part of the community.

My two friends that worked at Grandmothers said, why don't you come up and apply at Grandmothers here in Ralston? And so, I did. I started out busing tables. I think that I was probably 16, maybe just to turn 16. At that time, it was, it was THE spot. It was like hopping it was. It was. Yeah. People wanted to work there. They really did. I came from being a very timid, shy, introverted individual. I went to work there and, like I said, started out bussing tables. That was pretty easy, so they moved me to the kitchen. We only had a kitchen upstairs, but we had seating downstairs, so everything had to be carried down and we didn't have an elevator. And they had this little phone back there where the waitresses and bartenders would call up the orders. And so, I would take the phone call, call it

> the order and stuff, and carry these big, big trays. So, I started to communicate more with more people. We were a really close staff. Grandmothers really gave me an opportunity to come out and not be so shy. They made me feel really comfortable and I made some incredible friends. I felt part of the group. Part of Ralston.

The examples included in this section are just a few of the quotes that illustrate the co-existence of social memories, place attachment, and membership negotiation. Next, I'll provide examples that show evidence of self-structuring communication in concert with memory and attachment.

Self-structuring

Self-structuring communication includes any dialogue or text that serves to build or reform the organization with a sense of group coherence and understanding. Some examples include creating official documents, participation in meetings and rule-oriented communications. Self-structuring is found throughout the oral histories and appears alongside expressions of both social memory and place attachment. Oral history five includes an example of the three concepts working together.

> I guess I probably should know more about the library for being on the library board for as many years as I have It's funny that my patronage is different than probably most people. I should use the library as a resource more than I do. Like when I was on the board, so I talked to Francine before I said yes because I'm like, what am I getting myself into? I said, you know me, Francine. You know you know me, Francine. And I know you, and you know you don't normally see me in the library. And she's like, we also need that perspective. So that's how I got

onto the library board. And you know when there's only 5 members and you can be there for eight years. You get all the roles. So, when I left, I was president. You can only serve in an elected position for two years unless you've changed the bylaws. Then you had to have a year off and could go back and do it again. So, I helped to increase the library budget and to hire more staff. I'm proud of that.

In another example of formal participation in community boards and policymaking, oral history 20's speaker detailed her decision to run for school board.

I also served on the school board for eight years. When my kids were in high school. OK. Yes. Yes, it was when my kids were in high school. And I served two 4-year terms and then I decided that I should give somebody else an opportunity and stuff. So, it was a learning experience. I ended up running because I worked with a school board member. And she goes, you know if you're ever interested, I think you'd be a good asset. I just thought well, I'll throw my hat in the ring, and I got elected. I was a top vote getter, all right. They knew who I was because of my community involvement. My involvement in the schools, my involvement in the community.

A less formal example, from oral history 13, includes all three elements—self-structuring, social memory, and place attachment.

I think the police department doesn't have the right facts. OK. But anyway, the 1st police dog that was purchased in Ralston was in 1964. OK by the chief. And that, I think it was June of 64 when he got it, OK. In more recent years, Ralston got a police dog. It was touted as Ralston's first police dog, and I thought, no, I

remember when I was a senior, Ralston had a police dog, so I looked it up and in 1964 he was given the money to buy the dog.

Self-structuring takes many forms within the oral history documentation. Formal examples of organization building—rulemaking efforts like participation in boards and city council meetings—exist alongside less formal efforts like correcting recorded history and remembrances. Instances of activity coordination comprise the next section.

Activity coordination

Communication about work tasks including who is responsible for what aspect of an event is the constitutive part of activity coordination. Events, as we know from the Facebook post coding results, are a central focus within the City of Ralston and community members are heavily involved volunteers in the planning and execution of the city's events. Again, this task is found throughout the oral history data and is closely connected to social memory and place attachment within the narratives. The three examples here came from oral histories 12, 15, and 23 respectively.

Oral history 12's speaker is interested in delineating their responsibility for activities surrounding the Independence Day celebration versus those duties that remain with other community members.

> It started with the whole community pitching in and doing whatever was needed. People just did whatever. The firefighters were really involved and City Hall. But the whole thing was directed by the Chamber of Commerce. It was just a part-time thing, the Chamber of Commerce at that time, so we relied on volunteers. Now, it's different. It's just different. Too many people from the city paid to do the work. I guess people don't have time anymore like they used to when it was all

volunteer. I would like to see it go back with the Chamber and be volunteer run. It was better then.

Church organizations are another hot topic in the oral histories. The recollections of oral history 15's speaker include information about the coming together and splitting apart of churches in the community.

> Originally, it was the Ralston Community Church when they started. There were no churches, and the area was growing, so they started a church in the town hall basement. In the basement of the town hall, they would meet, and they would do church services. That was an independent church. At that point. It was a community thing. And then when it grew and they couldn't hold it anymore in the town hall, they walked up the hill and bought the piece of property which is now where my church, the Ralston United Church of Christ is at, and they built The Ralston Community Church, and they held services there. Now, after they were there for, you know, many years and more people came to the area than a lot of the chartered members would branch out then as there was enough Methodist. Then the Methodist broke off. Or enough Catholics and the Catholics broke off and the Lutherans, they would break off. Founding people from the Ralston Community Church were also chartered members or founding members of the other local churches here in town and stuff.

Oral history 23's speaker is interested in how decisions are being made within the City of Ralston and how a person might become part of that process. They are frustrated with a perceived lack of transparency about local building codes.

> Neighbor's husband died a few years back. She can't mow her lawn. Some of the guys in the neighborhood have been doing it. Sometimes, the city sends somebody if we don't get to it. We try to get it. Last time that happened they tried to charge her. Last I knew, there were no rules about that. I know in Omaha if they send somebody to your house, you're looking at a bill. I want to know who makes those decisions. I tried stopping into City Hall, okay. Nobody was there who could answer my questions. Might go to a City Council meeting.

This speaker's role and rules confusion facilitated an interest in activity coordination by checking in at City Hall or potentially attending a City Council meeting to ask questions. In the previous quote about churches, the speaker is memorializing the journey of people through church building and how the splits happened and who was involved. The first quote about Independence Day is focused solely on activity coordination, but all three also display qualities of social memory and place attachment. Finally, I'll writing about institutional positioning found in the oral histories.

Institutional positioning

Although institutional positioning is often carried out by people in leadership, it can be accomplished through communication by any member of an organization. Positioning includes attempts to clarify the role an organization occupies in relation to other organizations. In the case of a city like Ralston, one of the most important institutional positioning moves historically has been to distinguish the city from the metropolitan area that surrounds it. The included quotes show how Ralston-affiliated people, as organizational members, talk about Ralston's position. Quotes from oral histories 16, 25, and 26 are used here as examples.

Oral history 16's speaker is supportive of the community, views it as an important part of their life, and is enthusiastic about the differences between Ralston and Omaha.

> I think the big cities Omaha, Millard, you know, they don't always focus on what can we do as a community because they're so big. And that's probably because that is our strength. That's our place to build on. Things we can continue to do to reach out within our community to support each other, support each other's businesses, support the various schools. We see that we make different decisions, have differences, different ways of living and I think that's a big selling point for people who, like me, who don't really want to live out there in the city. People that come and stay at my Airbnb and they're coming for like, the College World Series or they're coming for big things. But they're like, oh, my gosh, I just like it here. It's like being in a community, not the city.

The speaker in oral history 25 is equally enthusiastic about how Ralston is different from surrounding areas.

> This is what I love about Ralston. Yeah, I mean, it's surrounded by Omaha, this humongous city, this huge city. And then in Sarpy County, all these other cities that are growing and everything as well. But in Ralston, we're having the types of events where we want to bring people in. People who might be neighbors who have never talked. Yeah, get people in and to know each other, yes. Come in. Have a conversation with your with maybe someone who lives down the street that you've never met or someone who lives outside the community who comes here. You know, I just, I love the way we try to get people connected.

Oral history 26 clearly demonstrates institutional positioning as a goal and a mission for people associated with Ralston.

> It's a really interesting thing to be isolated and, you know, have our own government, our own police force, our own library on public works and City Hall. And you know to be able to, the fire department is huge Volunteer Fire Department, but have all those organizations that are working to keep the city running. Our streets are always clean. Our crime rate is really super low. You know the library is doing phenomenal. All the groups are doing a phenomenal job of making our little city really cool and people love to live here. The houses sell in about two minutes. It's really, really, really different from other places in the area.

Institutional positioning, social memory, and place attachment are each plain in the previous examples. Each is from a community member who is deeply invested and connected to the community of Ralston. Throughout the previous pages, I included the remembrances of people that illustrate place attachments, social memory, institutional positioning, activity coordination, self-structuring, and membership negotiation. The fourth research question—how do the social memories and place attachments expressed about the City of Ralston demonstrate the Four Flows model of CCO—is answered by the previously shared exemplars and from other quotes available in the oral histories. The final sections in this paper, the discussion and conclusion, are designed to pull the entire paper together and to fully address the research goals.

CHAPTER VII – DISCUSSION

Using narrative analysis and qualitative coding, I successfully identified expressions of place attachment and social memory within the structure of the Four Flows model of CCO. I was able to make connections between social memory, place attachment, and citizens' communication with local government by applying narrative analysis to oral histories from city residents and qualitative coding to the city's official Facebook page while using public records and news articles to contextualize the data. Using CCO as the foundational underpinning of the study provides an organizational communication framework from which comes useful and valuable recommendations for nurturing the City of Ralston and its residents as a surviving organization.

Humor and loss emerging as meta categories was a surprising finding. The constant appearance of the two throughout the oral histories was surprising. To kick off the detailed discussion below, I will describe the identification of humor and loss as meta categories.

Humor and loss

Humor and loss were present in every recorded oral history. Initially, I classified loss as longing, but it became clear that the expressions weren't simply a longing for the past, but a sense of loss—as described by Fried (1963)—that had taken root due to a perceived detachment from physical places while the emotional attachment to the place remained. Oral histories, as personal recollections, lend themselves to expressions of humor and loss as parts of nostalgic remembrance. Viewing expressions of humor and loss as nostalgia may provide a more inclusive picture of the meanings included in the oral history data used in this research.

Idealized memory is one facet of nostalgia and is a factor in decision-making processes (Giguère & Love, 2013). According to neurological research about decision-making, making decisions using probability is complicated because humans privilege some memories and disregard others (Giguere & Love, 2013). The privileged memories are idealized or constructed to ascribe potentially undue positive attributes to recalled information (Brainerd & Reyna, 2002).

Previous nostalgia and memory studies emphasized the fluid nature of memory (Hauser, 2011; Middleton, 2014) and the ways that public memories are distinct from private memory (G. Dickinson & Ott, 2013; Ewalt, 2011). The processes between idealized memory and nostalgia and oral history are potentially important in the consideration of communication between residents and local government as examined in this research and should be part of future research.

Although humor and organizational communication appears in the extant literature (Meyer, 1997), humor in connection to CCO has been previously explored by few researchers. One notable article looked at the impact of disparaging humor in the context of CCO within an organization engaged in new diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Wolfgruber, 2023). Similarly, the concept of loss is seldom linked to CCO or researched in conjunction with it. Bean, et al. (2015) briefly mentioned loss within organizations in their study of al-Qa'ida as an organization. The appearance of humor and loss as overarching categories—or as I enjoyed defining them, meta categories—within CCO is notable and brings forward new ideas for future research in how humor and loss color the remembrances and communications of people as they mostly unwittingly work to constitute organizations.

Social memory

Social memory—often identified as a form of collective memory (Orianne & Eustache, 2023)—is evident in the oral history data. Memory studies is generating increased interest in various social science fields (Drozdzewski & Birdsall, 2019), and the data generated in this study is an example of the power of memory studies. Although communication scholars have used memory to frame rhetorical work (Dickinson, et al., 2010; Zagacki & Gallagher, 2009) and quantitative work (Dahmen, et al., 2019), this qualitative study adds to that body of knowledge in important ways as recommended by Aden, et al. (2009).

In the case of Ralston, Nebraska, social memory functions in two ways. First, it provides complementary and competing versions of a single event or experience. Luhmann (2006) said that social memory serves to create shared knowledge about a specific event. In the case of the Ralston oral histories, that was evident in mentions of various city celebrations and the discussion of various city amenities. Within the oral histories, newer city developments are mentioned by multiple people using shared language. As Luhmann (2006) suggested, those individuals could carry on a discussion about events and developments using shared knowledge created by social memory.

Social memory is present in other forms; as shared experiences that generate memories which may agree or might overlap but carry some disagreement and as memories that hinged on social connections in a certain place (Olick & Robbins, 1998). The presence of social memory alone is not surprising or unexpected. Oral history has seldom been used to divine any type of collective memory (Helgren, 2015). However, my research confirms that oral history is a viable source of data involving social memories.

To fully understand the overall implications of social memories to an organization in the context of my research goals, the findings about social memory must first be connected to place attachments and then to the framework of CCO.

Place attachment

Expressions of place attachment are present in the examined oral histories. They exist, as suggested by Lewicka (2011) in a tripartite model including expressions of emotional, functional, and social attachment. Emotional attachment is identifiable as people express social memories in impassioned ways. Their emotions are plain and indicate both attachment and the presence of social memory formation or recall. Quotations from several of the oral histories qualify as examples of this type of attachment. In oral history 3, for example, the speaker recalled memories of his marriage and the people who attended in the Ralston community. The recall was infused with both emotional connections to place and memories that could result in shared language and that were created in connection with others.

Functional attachment is apparent in the oral histories through comments like, “Ralston is my home.” Another expression of functional attachment in the Ralston oral histories can be found in statements like, “My home is here. My family is here” and “I was able to buy my parents’ house in Ralston, so I am still here” in oral history 16. Even these expressions of functional attachments are laden with social memories. The memories—formed in connection with others—are the foundation for the attachment. Without the memories, the attachment isn’t likely to exist.

Comments like “everyone was at Oak Hill pool” and “the firefighters were a family” in oral history 13 are emblematic of social attachment. The evidence of social

attachment is present throughout the oral histories, and social attachment can be viewed as an extension of social memory.

Within the Ralston oral histories, social memory and place attachment appear to be intertwined, but the two together create an incomplete picture of the powers at work within the community of Ralston. Connecting the concepts of social memory and place attachment to the Four Flows of CCO creates a complete picture of the opportunities available for city government to engage with individual members of the organization.

In the case of the examined oral histories, social memory, and place attachment function as support for Four Flows. I suggest that prerequisites—such as memory and attachment—be investigated further as necessary for the functioning of CCO. Although this work tied the three together to examine recorded oral histories, I did not make assumptions about or directly investigate the necessity of the three parts to the other. Rather, I investigated connections between the three concepts.

Organizational communication and the Four Flows

Data gathered an analyzed from Facebook posts and from oral histories revealed that the City of Ralston functions as an organization with commenters and speakers working as members of the same organization. The city—also named as community during the results section of this work—meets the requirements of organization as defined by organizational communication scholars (Mumby, 1997; McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Membership in the organization, although more open than some organizations, is still controlled by financial needs. People need enough money to live in a place with, as reported via the oral histories, an inadequate supply of affordable housing and a dearth of multi-family housing. These problems can be explored through organizational

communication. A complete look at evidence of the Four Flows and the suggestions produced from that data can be helpful to the city as an organization.

Members of the organization conveyed ideas about membership negotiation (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) as suggestions for welcoming newcomers to the community. In oral history 3, the speaker implored that a sort of welcome wagon be instituted for newcomers and lamented the lack of communication between new residents and those with longer tenure. Another speaker, in oral history 12, suggested that the city host free, public education events designed to help newcomers learn about the community including making connections with city officials and city services. These suggestions have already been passed on to the Ralston City Clerk and Mayor. They are outstanding strategies to facilitate membership into the organization of the city and, through activity coordination with the Chamber of Commerce, will be inexpensive ventures for the city with a potentially significant return on investment in the form of increased place attachment for newer residents.

Increased transparency by city leadership, which is something the oral history participants expressed interest in experiencing, is evident in the Facebook posts about city functions. However, it is especially apparent in the snow removal post with broad community support. The openness in the post and the resulting support from organization members indicates a positive response to transparent communication by leadership. This is one form of self-structuring communication (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) as it serves to establish methods and modes of communication between levels within the organization.

In the oral histories and the Facebook posts, activity coordination (Vasquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) exists as questions about who is organizing and facilitating various events or city functions. The city can use this type of communication to help residents understand where their volunteer efforts are needed and how they can engage with happenings in the city. In the same way, information about institutional positioning—how Ralston is unique and desirable in comparison to other locales—can be widely disseminated using social media. Currently, the city does not include social media management in any of their paid employment positions. Doing so would broaden the city's public reach and provide an opportunity for citizens and people who are interested in the city to interact with the organization.

Limitations and weaknesses

The work in this paper was limited in scope both by the chosen methods and the location of the study. The study is highly localized and is only meant to be applicable to the limited participants in the localized place at the time of the Facebook posts and recording of the oral histories. Although these qualities are limitations, the research could be replicated in other areas to expand the knowledge produced here.

Weaknesses of the study include those previously mentioned in the results section regarding the disagreement between the inductive codes developed during analysis of the oral histories and Hummon's (1992) typology of community attachment. In our analysis, we did not find evidence of two of Hummon's (1992) types: uncommitted placelessness and relativity. This may be attributed to the long-term residency of the oral history participants. Because there were very few participants with newer connections to the community, both relativity (attachment that can happen wherever a person ends up) and

uncommitted placelessness (tenuous attachment that is likely temporary) might be present in young or new residents of Ralston. However, the sample was limited to the people who chose to record oral histories. Unfortunately, that sample included very few young people or newer residents which limited the results.

Wrap up

In the end, this work exposed several opportunities for the City of Ralston to engage more fully with its residents by embracing the Four Flows model of CCO to reach out to an increasingly diverse population of citizens. Additionally, it holds suggestions that social memory and place attachment may be prerequisites for people to engage in the Four Flows as part of organizational communication. This is an area for future research as is the use of additional qualitative methods to explore the Four Flows.

The unique combination of oral histories and social media in this work adds to the body of qualitative organizational communication research. The two were used to triangulate data on the Flour Flows model within organizational communication with citizens as members working to constitute the city as an organization. Facebook data was crucial to the process as it offered not only the views of people who did not record oral histories, but also included official communication with the public. Creating a message that is potentially available to anyone with internet access is a process not seen elsewhere in my data set for this project.

Crystallization of the data related to the Four Flows was important to establish the city as an organization and to offer a basis to make conclusions about the results. Using narrative analysis and qualitative coding allowed for my position as a post-modern researcher to flourish as I analyzed and summarized the data from a constructivist

perspective. Although these approaches are not unheard of in the study of organizational communication, the combination of data sources, research orientation and methods, and the theoretical framing offers many openings for future research in city planning, organizational communication, public relations, and political communication. There is room for expansion in many directions.

CHAPTER VIII – CONCLUSION

The final lessons from this research are simple, but they are not easy to act upon. People connected to the City of Ralston are generally enthusiastic about the possibilities contained within while being realistic about current and future financial challenges facing the city. That doesn't, however, indicate that they possess unlimited resources or the ability to help the city with its financial constraints. In the past, the city has relied upon elected leaders to make decisions and choices for the populous. As a result, some residents feel like decisions are made in a vacuum without public input. Those citizens will be especially important as the city moves forward with plans for attracting new residents. Their experiences and institutional knowledge are invaluable as the city assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the area while working to make the city attractive to people who will pay the high property taxes in the city.

To foster connections in new residents and maintain existing connections, leaders must be open about the infrastructure issues facing the city and all organization members should make use of membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning communication to maintain the organization. In a move that indicates steps toward more open communication, city leaders recently began working to inform Ralston residents about the city's infrastructure challenges. Leaders are using public forums—both in-person events hosted by the city and online feedback mechanisms—to inform citizens about current and expected future repair needs and to gather input from residents. The overall goal of the city's efforts is to assure the future of the city by developing a 10-year strategic plan for infrastructure replacement.

Determining where necessary funding will come from and if any agreement with the City of Omaha will be part of the plan is a challenge that city leaders and city residents will need to face honestly and openly. The last time this type of decision-making took place in Ralston, residents supported financing and building the arena. That decision was, according to publicly available documents and oral histories, heavily influenced by city leadership's assurances that Omaha would be less likely to annex Ralston because of arena-related debt. That debt will consume a good portion of the Ralston city budget until 2032 with maintenance and operation costs continuing to weigh on the city afterwards. Making a similar choice regarding future spending—even for necessary spending—would be unwise and unlikely to assure the city's survival in future decades.

Instead, city leaders can engage in the Four Flows by encouraging community buy-in through extensive use of social media tools like Facebook. Meeting people online—where they increasingly engage—should be a deliberate part of information gathering and sharing as the city develops a strategic plan for the coming decade. Paying a person to manage social media and/or someone to facilitate and plan communication and events surrounding the strategic plan would help Ralston residents feel like information was being shared and encourage them to share ideas with city leaders.

Hosting focus groups made up of Ralston residents and other stakeholders (e.g. people who don't live in Ralston but own a business or property in the city) would provide the city with rich information from people who do not speak up on social media or who are hesitant to speak in a larger forum like a City Council meeting or an issue specific city-sponsored public meeting. Doing so would provide more information about

the social memories and place attachments of residents which could then be used to examine more fully what connects people to Ralston. An expanded dataset on memory and attachment would provide actionable items related to future planning. For example, the reuse of the old Ralston Arena sign at one entrance to the city (Stewart, 2023) is a way to honor some people's fond memories of the city, but it also might remind residents of their tax bills and the city's debt each time they drive into town. The City of Ralston is—by the nature of its location and independence—a unique place where specific social memories and place attachments matter dearly to residents. Leveraging those emotional and functional attachments in public displays which connect the past to the future is an outstanding idea. However, the way those efforts are assessed and completed must be carefully considered. To do so, gathering more data from a diverse cross-section of residents is crucial to making the most impact with the most people.

The city does not currently employ any type of communication specialist or public relations manager. It may be possible to hire one person who can fill multiple needs—social media management, managing public forums related to strategic planning, and conducting formal research on Ralston-affiliated folks' wants and needs. Overall, communication with the city's residents must take place in open forums with transparency in results sharing and honest examination of the city's budget and future needs. Financial investment in a full-time employee who facilitates communication processes between members of the organization may be viewed temporarily as unnecessary spending. However, the potential gain in community members' engagement and the possibilities to grow and maintain the city as an organization far exceeds perceived and real costs of creating that position.

Avoiding another 20-year spending commitment that decreases confidence in local government and threatens the city financially should be a primary goal of city leadership. That can realistically be achieved by involving community members actively in every decision-making step possible, even if that means simply communicating about the process and how decisions will be made. Ralston has rebuilt multiple times following financial and natural disasters. The city isn't facing a full rebuild at this time, but trust in local government must be increased so that financial stability can be part of the city's future.

Although all the above recommendations and commentary focus on the City of Ralston, these methods of gathering information and acting upon it can be useful in many small cities and towns that are facing many of the same financial challenges. For decades, brain drain has been used as a term describing the loss of young people to more urban areas and small towns and rural areas have worked to stem that tide (Plane & Jurjevich, 2009). It may be very difficult for a small town to justify a paid position—even a part-time position—for communication efforts. However, a position might be shared by several small towns in an area or long-time community residents could work with business owners or school staff and students to develop social media campaigns and other communication coordination efforts.

As mentioned at the beginning of my conclusion, the final lessons from this research are simple, but they are not easy to act upon. All the above recommendations involve a deeper connection between city government and city residents, increased communication, and conscious and deliberate efforts to build and maintain the community as an organization. People within the communities with social memories and

place attachments are likely already actively engaged in the Four Flows model of CCO, and, if city leaders find time to ask them, they are likely to share their pasts in efforts to assure the future of the places they call home.

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