

*A commentary on community living*

**Finding and creating a sense of community**

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**Abstract**

A sense of community is very important to an individual, as it helps him/her maintain a sense of belongingness and benefit from the availability of social support. While there is a great deal of research regarding how communities are created and maintained, there is still much more to be done. This article describes an informal investigation into peoples' understanding of community, how they found their social niches, and discussions of the similarities found between different interviewees. The initial approach was to compare and contrast two very different cities: Boston and New York, highlighting the impact the environment has on the ability of one to create his/her social group. However, what was found through conversation was that community is less about the location one is embedded in, and more about lifestyle choices.

**Introduction**

“Go back to New York!” shouted one passenger. From the sea of Red Sox hats, I saw a foolishly brave Yankees fan standing at the back of the T. It was baseball season in Boston and we were headed to Fenway. With one of the oldest and fiercest rivalries in sports ever seen, Bostonians and New Yorkers clearly don't see eye to eye. Not only are the inhabitants of each city loyal to their sports teams, but they also appear to be fiercely loyal to the cities themselves.

Despite being a born and bred New Yorker, I often find myself in Boston to visit friends, attend conferences, and of course go on the occasional Sam Adams brewery tour. While hard to articulate, there is clearly a difference between these two bustling cities. With over 85 private colleges and universities in the Boston metropolitan area, it is considered the college capital of the world. New York City, on the other hand, is often referred to as the financial capital due to the plethora of large companies, equity firms, and hedge funds. The clear difference between these two cities had me wondering, are people, who have spent time in both locations, aware of these differences and does this affect their sense of community and ability to find their niche?

Being that the cities each have their own unique focus and feel, it would make sense that the environment impacts the social lives of young adults. To take a more objective stance, I decided to establish an interview guide for various young professionals who have spent time in both New York and Boston. My goal was to examine common themes dealing with location and life satisfaction, hoping that this would shed some light on what helps a person find their clique. What I discovered regarding peoples' sense of community, turned out to be less about their actual location and more about their lifestyle. “Community,” rather than being driven by the city, is largely derisive of a connection to others based upon personal interests and lifestyle choices.

### **What is community?**

While there is an understanding of community belongingness, it is important to establish exactly what “community” means. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Basically it is the relationship that an individual has with a larger group in which there is a sense of belonging and responsibility to other members, with these elements also being shared between the constituents.

Prezza and Constantini (1998) discuss the integral components of being part of a community. They note that the first component, or belongingness, means that the individual feels a sense of being tied to others in his/her surroundings. The second component is influence, which is the bidirectional relationship between the individual and group in which each impacts and exerts an influence on the other. The third is integration and fulfillment of needs, in which the person works toward meeting his/her goals, while at the same time accomplishing those of the community. Finally, the fourth component is a shared emotional connection, which involves the realization that the emotions of the group are based on the shared history of the group and its members. These components demonstrate the importance of integration and cohesiveness in creating a sense of community.

While a community is often discussed in terms of territorial location, as the neighborhood a person lives in consists of his/her community mates, the term will be used in a broader sense here. The purpose of the discussions I had with my interviewees was to find out exactly what community meant to them, if/how it was influenced by their environment, and how their various communities formed and developed.

### **Boston vs. New York**

Before elaborating on the findings from the informational interviews, it is important to discuss the impetus for this investigation and the choice of these two particular cities. As previously mentioned Boston and New York, while both urban cities, are very different. Boston has more of an academic focus, while New York is centered on professionals. Over the course of my academic career, I was surrounded by several people who spent a significant amount of time in one city, and for either personal or professional reasons, moved to the other.

Looking at statistics from the Boston Globe, a modest 12,947 people per square mile live in Boston compared to 27,243 in New York. Forty three percent of the population of Boston has a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 35.9% in New York, and according to “America’s Favorite Cities” survey, Boston ranked 3 on an intelligence metric in 2011, compared to New York’s far inferior showing at 17 (Swidey, 2012a).

Boston, which boasts more colleges per square foot than any other city in the United States serves as both the quintessential college town and academics playground. As noted by McSweeney and Marshall (2009), the Boston metropolitan area attracts more than 360,000 students from all over the world. The large concentration of universities in the area has had a positive impact on the workforce, attracting highly educated individuals from a variety of fields. Furthermore, “the Boston area location quotient indicates that college and university employment was approximately three-and-a-half times more concentrated, compared with the U.S. average, and demonstrates that none of the other major metropolitan areas came close to

matching Boston area's concentration of employment in higher education" (McSweeney & Marshall, 2009, p. 64). Compared to all other metropolitan areas in the country, in 2007, Boston had the highest industry concentration of colleges and universities, with New York, Northern New Jersey, and the Long Island area combined placing fifth.

New York City, which actually has more college students than Boston has people (Swidey, 2012b), is still much more focused on finance and business, as it has long been lauded the financial capital. Despite the economic crisis, respondents to a Bloomberg poll consider New York to be the leading global financial center (Fitzgerald, 2009). While London and Singapore are quickly becoming fierce competitors for this title, New York is still marked by financial institutions such as Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange, symbols of money, power, and prestige.

When my interviewees were asked to describe the "feel" of Boston and New York City, many echoed the information already presented. However, the most interesting finding was that this environmental difference didn't affect their sense of community or ability to form connections with others in any major way. Other themes, such as choosing communities based on lifestyle choices and forming groups when already established ones were not available, quickly emerged over the course of my discussions. These important themes will be discussed below.

### **Bonding via shared experiences and lifestyle choices**

All individuals I spoke with experienced a sense of community through bonding with others who share similar life experiences. The interviewees discussed searching for a person to offer a helping hand during challenging times, and this sense of trust created long lasting friendships that extended beyond the working hours. These friendships quickly evolved into a sense of community amongst those working together.

One educator I spoke with, who was an alternative certification teacher, now serving a leadership role in the New York City Department of Education, noted that he originally leaned on others from his teacher prep program in Boston when he hit roadblocks in the classroom. After a while, his social circle and support group consisted of the friendships he formed with other teachers in the school he was working in, rather than those who he went to school in Boston with. Proximity and constant exposure to others in the working environment led to friendships both within and outside of the classroom. Now, hundreds of miles from his birthplace and from the schools he once taught in, he still relies on his coworkers, as he considers this group his community.

This individual noted that while in Boston for graduate school, he spent most of his time with his peers in his cohort. Upon moving to New York for his job, he did notice a lack of support for educators and decided to co-found a chapter for professionals in the education sector. Rather than considering the lack of established groups for educators in New York as a roadblock, he took it upon himself to create one. Instead of being hindered by the location in which he was situated, he changed it to suit his needs and those with similar interests.

The people I spoke to were also quick to identify with others who shared similar lifestyle choices. One woman, a medical writer, described that when she was in graduate school in Boston she readily identified herself as being a part of the neuroscience community, as this was the topic she was pursuing for her doctoral degree. After completing her degree, and moving back to New York, she now identifies as being a member of the vegan community. Not only did

this shift in association with a particular community reflect a change in her status as she developed from a student to a permanent resident, but it also reflected a change in her location and her perception of the availability of others who shared her particular interests and traits. She noted that in Boston, it was much easier to be part of the neuroscience community, as she was surrounded by her classmates and spent most of her time in the lab, however this was less about the educational environment of the city for her, and more about her academic position at the time. While she was also vegan during this period, her focus was on schoolwork, not on outside lifestyle choices. This became much more salient upon her move to New York and settling down in an apartment on the Lower East Side, where several vegan friendly dwellers live.

While the people I spoke to came from all different walks of life, they were quick to explain that they felt most comfortable relating to others similar to themselves. Their shared experiences and characteristics bonded them together, and helped to create a cohesive community feel.

### **Creating communities: Proactively searching for others**

Another theme which quickly emerged during my discussions was the need to proactively search for like-minded companions in environments in which they seemed far and few between. As previously mentioned, the former teacher, now NYCDOE employee, created a group for young professionals in the education sector once he moved to New York. In asking him what advice he would give to others looking for a sense of community, he suggested searching for nonprofit organizations or affinity groups which spark a person's interests. He also said that for religious individuals, seeking out a church or temple would also be a great way to start. He did note the difficulty in trying to find new friends at an older age, but stressed the importance of "putting yourself out there."

The medical writer I spoke with noted that we are in a digital age, so finding opportunities through Facebook<sup>®</sup> and meetup.com<sup>®</sup> are great first steps to connect with others. For professional purposes, she noted that LinkedIn<sup>®</sup> is a great tool for networking. She said that when she had lived in Boston, she didn't try as hard as she should have to find good social outlets, which might have been why she wasn't happy there and never felt a strong sense of community. However, at the time, with her school commitments, it seemed to be an impossible task. No matter where you are, she said that you need to seek out others "with similar interests."

### **Choice of role models**

Another major similarity between the individuals I interviewed was the reasons for their role model choices. While this is not directly related to forming a community, the role model you choose to look up to will affect the way in which you live your life, and thus is important to discuss.

Most interviewees discussed individuals, who through their actions or words, imparted wisdom and served as a source of inspiration. The educator I spoke with noted that he most admired Lyndon B. Johnson due to his ability to take over during a time of crisis and stabilize the country when everyone was in a state of panic after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He found it fascinating that one day you can wake up and suddenly be the president of the United States, assuming a role which you did not think you were going to have. In my opinion, this closely mirrored this interviewee's professional life, as he had just taken on a major role

directing clusters of schools in New York City after the previous person had left. He too had a larger than life responsibility.

The medical writer chose her mom as her most influential role model and said "... she is the only person in the entire world who has been there for me throughout my entire life no matter what. She taught me how to love unconditionally and to see the good in people. And not to put up with injustice without fighting back." This individual, like her mom, faced adversity many times throughout her life, her struggle to find a sense of community, and the need to find the positive amidst some otherwise negative school and work situations.

Most people chose role models that they were easily able to identify with, either because they had been through similar experiences or believed in the principles by which these mentor figures lived their lives. Even though the role models ranged from family members to historical figures, each choice was a person to whom the interviewee felt a connection to.

### Final thoughts

The initial purpose of this exploration was to note the ways in which two cities, each with their own unique feel and context, could affect their inhabitants. What I found during the course of my discussions with individuals who spent time in both Boston and New York City was that a sense of community is much less about the physical surroundings a person is embedded in, but more about finding a group in which the members share similar experiences, characteristics, and views of world.

People gravitate towards others comparable to themselves, and in environments in which this is not possible, they will often seek out ways to create a community. This can be done by proactively seeking out similar others or forming a group in the hopes of enticing them to join. No matter where you are physically located, surrounding yourself by supportive, like-minded individuals really helps to fill any void.

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