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Reframing the Community: How and Why Member Participation Shifts in the Face of Change

Krystal Laryea[1]

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Abstract

How and why do people reframe their understanding of the communities and organizations to which they belong? I draw on the case of a collegiate religious fellowship that moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic to examine how individuals' frames and participation patterns evolved as their community underwent a collective shift. I argue that reframing is triggered by temporal disconnect between past frames and present circumstances, present circumstances and imagined futures, or all three. My findings add nuance to existing theorizing on how members' frames shape participation by revealing how positive frames that sustain high levels of participation in "settled times" can become a liability in "unsettled times." My findings have relevance for understanding participation trajectories in a variety of group contexts, and advance theorizing on micro-level framing as a dynamic, fundamentally temporal process.

Keywords Frames · Organizational participation · Community · Space · Temporality · Ethnography

Since Goffman's (1974) seminal work on frame analysis, the concept of frames has proven indispensable to social movement scholars and cultural sociologists alike. How people frame the circumstances they find themselves in (Rosen 2017) and the communities that they belong to (Small 2002; 2004) has enabled us to better understand variation in how people act and the commitments they sustain (Becker 1960; Kanter 1968; Loder and Stuart 2022). Yet, we lack clarity on how and why people go about *reframing* in the face of change. Answering this question is essential for advancing theorizing on framing as a dynamic process (Benford and Snow 2000; Wood et al. 2018) and deepening our understanding of how framing links to outcomes, especially patterns of civic, communal, and organizational participation (Effler 2010; Small 2002).

✉ Krystal Laryea
kas713@stanford.edu

[1] Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

I focus on how and why people engage in reframing a shared community in the face of change, which in turn shapes their participation trajectories. Significant research provides insights on the structural and cultural factors shaping individuals' participation in neighborhoods (Lichterman 2008; Sampson et al. 1999; Small 2002), organizations (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014), social movement groups (Kellogg 2009; McAdam 1986), and schools (Guhin 2020). But we lack a full understanding of how individuals' participation patterns evolve in the face of community-level changes, such as spatial change. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this issue to the fore, as schools, nonprofits, churches, corporations, and neighborhood associations have grappled with new formats for gathering, connecting, and pursuing shared endeavors. Beyond the pandemic, collectively experienced change may instigate participation shifts in cases ranging from gentrification and climate change in neighborhoods to leader, staff, and geographic transitions in organizations.

Reframing, the process wherein people give up old frames and craft new ones, was first theorized by Goffman (1974)[1], but he did not specify the mechanisms by which reframing happens. I advance Goffman's work by revealing how reframing is an inherently temporal process which involves reflecting on the past and anticipating the future to craft new frames or renew old frames in the present. To develop this argument, I draw on an empirical puzzle that I observed while conducting an ethnography with a collegiate Christian fellowship: when the organization sought to sustain its community online during the coronavirus pandemic, core members moved on, while peripheral and new members moved in.

Existing literature on commitment and participation suggests that core members, who have the deepest commitments and most positive frames, will stay involved even amidst setback and change, whereas peripheral members will become less involved in the face of setbacks and change (Kanter 1968; Effler 2010; Small 2002). On the other hand, theorizing on narrative rupture and frame dissonance suggests that those with the most positive frames may struggle the most to adapt to change (Goffman 1974; Rosen 2017). My findings shed light on the conditions under which positive frames and deep commitments may be a liability for sustaining participation.

Framing is a dynamic process, where individuals look to both past and future to cohere working frames that can guide participation decisions in the present. My primary contribution is to theorize one of the mechanisms by which reframing occurs: *temporal disconnect.* When present experiences do not align with past frames or imagined futures, people engage in reframing to resolve this disconnect or frame renewal to shore up past frames. I find that core members who held the most positive frames prior to the pandemic struggled the most with adapting to community-level changes, which triggered reframing and led to lowered participation. The core members who did sustain high participation engaged in frame renewal to reconcile past frames and present experiences. Peripheral and new members, who were ambivalent about or disinterested in CF while on campus, engaged in reframing when the pandemic shifted their relational networks and communal opportunities. They came to see CF as increasingly "beautiful," and increased their participation.

[1] As discussed more below, Goffman focused on describing two types of reframing in *Frame Analysis*: keying and breaking frame. However, he focused on describing what these processes entail, rather than when and why they happen.

By comparing those who reframed to those who did not, I shed light on the underlying process through which people update their frames in unsettling times (Swidler 1986).

In addition, these findings advance sociological theorizing on participation and commitment by highlighting how these processes are shaped by people's internal, reframing work in the face of collective shifts (Kanter 1968; Lichterman 2008; Rosen 2017; Small 2002). Achieving and sustaining high member participation is at the heart of most collective enterprises. The process of reframing put forth here has relevance for scholars studying participation in any organizational or communal context where exit is possible, including religious congregations, civic associations, social movements, neighborhoods, and firms. In the discussion, I consider the limitations and implications of my findings for other types of reframing, communal organizations, and collective shifts.

Theoretical Framework

How Primary Frameworks Shift

Frame analysis is a method to understand how people organize and interpret everyday experiences. As Goffman put it (1974, 8), "when individuals attend to any current situation, the face the question: 'what is it that's going on here?'"[2] Since Goffman's writing, sociologists have found frames to be a useful conceptual tool, not only for examining how people interpret strips of action, but also the broader commitments that people make to social movements, organizations, communities, relationships, and personal projects (Benford and Snow 2000; Small 2002; Snow 2013; Swidler 2001). Reflecting on these developments, Small et al. (2010, 9) describe frames in broader terms, as "the lenses through which we observe and interpret social life."

This view of frames as lenses has led to new insights on how frames shape strategies of action (Swidler 1986). For example, Small (2002, 2004) shows how variation in how residents viewed their neighborhood – through a historical lens of political mobilization versus a contemporary lens of a housing project – drove residents' participation in neighborhood life. Likewise, Harding (2007, 2010) shows how different frames for teenage pregnancy shape young people's decision making in romantic relationships, and Young (2010) highlights divergent frames among working-class Black men for "good jobs" that are consequential for how men navigate job markets. Collectively, these studies show that frames structure how people interpret events and environments, and therefore how they react to them (Small et al. 2010).

Yet we lack clarity on how and why people's primary frameworks, or lenses, change, a process that can be summarized with the term *reframing*. For example, while Small (2002; 2004) shows that reframing led to changes in residents' neighborhood involvement, it is unclear why a few younger residents adopted the "beautiful community" frame held by older residents, while most did not. Goffman

[2] Goffman (like Schutz [1962] and Berger and Luckmann [1966]), was primarily interested in the organization of everyday experiences, what he calls "strips of action."

(1974) describes two processes related to reframing, keying and breaking frame, but is vague on answering *how* and *why* reframing happens. Given what we know about how frames guide action, it is critical to understand the processes by which frames change. To address this issue, I first outline the insights Goffman offers on reframing processes, then turn to discussing research relevant to the setting for this study: sustaining participation in a communal organization in the face of change.

Goffman (1974, 43) defines keying as "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else." For example, when a person realizes that a strip of fighting is a strip of play, they are engaged in keying, realizing that the interaction is occurring at a different register than the one they initially thought. How does keying happen? In some instances, bracketing is employed to signal to participants a shift in key.[3] However, keying and bracketing are limited in their potential to explain why a person's primary lens for their neighborhood, their job, or their romantic relationship (in other words, a broader commitment in life) would shift (Swidler 2001).

Goffman's concept of "breaking frame" provides more insight on this issue. He suggests that breaking frame happens in the face of:

> an occurrence which cannot be effectively ignored and to which the frame cannot be applied, with resulting bewilderment and chagrin on the part of the participants. In brief, a break can occur in the applicability of the frame, a break in its governance (347).

Just as actors forgetting their lines often breaks audience members' immersion in a play, events can occur that challenge people's primary frameworks for their commitments.[4] This connects to Rosen's (2017) concept of narrative rupture. She argues that people stay in poor neighborhoods when they can maintain an overarching narrative about the neighborhood, but when events happen that rupture these narratives, they leave. When a person experiences a frame break, "the nature of his [or her] engrossment and belief suddenly changes" (Goffman 1974, 378). If this happens, "easy acceptance of the prior conception of what was going on" can no longer be experienced. Thus, both breaking frame and narrative rupture align with Swidler's (1986, 2001) concept of "unsettledness." She argues that personal and public culture operate differently in settled and unsettled times. With the latter, what was once taken for granted suddenly becomes contested and contestable. In short, the concept of breaking frame highlights a set of conditions in which reframing becomes possible and sometimes even necessary. Breaking frame is fundamentally

[3] A simple illustration helps make this point. The role of the curtain in a play, and the backstage-frontstage distinction more broadly, is to bracket the beginning or the end of an act, so that audience members and actors alike have clarity on whether actors are playing their characters or being themselves. Lee (2009) offers a more recent analysis of keying in the context of rap battles, revealing how embodied and emotional cues sustain the shared presumption that "this is play."

[4] For example, an instance of adultery can break a person's frame for their marriage, or leader turnover can break members' frames for a communal organization or movement.

temporal: something in the present does not match what one expected, based on past experiences.

Some existing scholarship addresses how spatial and temporal dynamics shape group emotions and valuations. For example, Effler (2010) shows how social movement organizations collectively navigate frame breaks at the micro-level, adapting their tempos and generating rhythmic emotional cycles that serve to sustain participation and a sense of constancy in the face of change and setbacks. In this case, temporal disconnect is negotiated collectively, but group members' private negotiations of frame breaks are not addressed. In addition, Gould (2009) examines the interplay of affect, emotional habitus, and political action and inaction by examining the history of AIDS activism in the U.S. in the 1980s and 90s. This analysis provides critical insights on how temporal disconnect is navigated through emotion work over a long-time scale (decades) and in macro-level social movements, but the micro-level processes underlying macro-level shifts are unspecified. In sum, we lack clarity on the micro-level processes by which individuals who belong to collectives decide to adopt new lenses for these collectives, and why some people manage to sustain old frames while others craft new ones in the face of community-level shifts. This is especially important for situations where changes occur that are ambiguous, as is the case in many social movement and civic organizational contexts (rather than clearly negative or positive, as was the case in Rosen's [2017] study). I turn now to discussing one such case, the reframing of "community" in the face of spatial change.

Reframing Community in the Face of Change

To deepen our understanding of how and why reframing happens, I examine how people engaged in reframing in a communal organization that underwent a collective shift. Community is a slippery and politically contested term that resists easy definition (Hill Collins 2010 Vaisey 2007). Yet there is consensus among scholars that any community has a few key elements (Hillery 1982). First, every community needs a binding force. For residential communities (such as neighborhoods), the binding force is usually a shared place (Gieryn 2000). Organizational communities have some form of a shared purpose, which may be religious, political, economic, or social in nature. Second, every community needs social ties among its members (Simmel [1908] 2009). Third, communities need some form of shared space for the pursuit of purpose and fostering of social ties (Kellogg 2009; Small and Adler 2019). We can think of shared space as the stage upon which community is lived out (Goffman 1959).[5] Although shared physical space has long been considered a bedrock of community (Brint 2001;

[5] In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) argues that dramaturgical stages provide specific frames or "definitions of the situation." When the conditions of the stage change, previous frames may no longer resonate or work in the same way. That said, some may attempt to sustain previous frames in new scenes and stages, while others may reframe not only the present stage, but past scenes as well. Examining why people adopt these different modes of framing is the central goal of my empirical analysis.

Hillery 1982), technology enables communal spaces that are not bound by place (Rheingold 2000; Wellman 1979). A community-level shift can occur along any of these dimensions: a change in purpose, a change in the network of ties, or a change in spatial structure. In the present case, I focus on *spatial change* which has both theoretical and practical significance in contemporary times.

Specifically, I examine a case where a communal organization went from physically co-present to physically distant and spatially mediated. Shared physical space has been shown to play an important role in fostering attachment and belonging in the context of residential communities (Flaherty & Brown 2010; Sampson 1988, 1991), organizations (Törnqvist 2021), and social movements (Polletta 1999). In a recent review, Small and Adler (2019) conclude that physical space continues to play a central role in the formation of social ties. But on the other hand, the importance of physical space for communal endeavors has been challenged, especially by digital sociologists. Wellman (1979, 1206) argues that community in modernity is neither lost nor saved, but liberated, affirming "the prevalence and importance of primary ties but maintain[ing] that most ties are not now organized into densely knit, tightly bounded solidarities." Studies in this vein challenge the idea that shared physical space is essential for community but tend to focus on forms of community that were never bound by physical space to begin with (Christin and Lewis 2021; Hamilton et al. 2014; Taylor 2018). Thus, it remains unclear how members of communities and communal organizations deal with *spatial change* - in this case, the shift from physically proximate to physically "scattered." This is an ideal setting to examine reframing because people are likely to interpret the same global "event" differently, some undergoing a major frame shift, while others manage to maintain prior frames.

One factor likely to shape reframing is members' level of commitment. Existing research has shown that those with the most positive frames tend to have the highest commitment to participation (Small 2002, 2004). But it is unclear how reframing processes may vary based on commitment levels. Longstanding and recent scholarship suggests that commitments are often deepened through sacrifice and difficulties (Aksoy and Gambetta 2022; Kanter 1968) but it is also possible that those with deeper commitments will experience greater narrative rupture in the face of change and mourn the loss of the former status quo (Rosen 2017).

My findings affirm that reframing (and the participation shifts that accompany it) is not simply tied to variation in commitment or member timelines. Both core and peripheral members engaged in reframing processes as well as frame maintenance. That said, these different types of members had different frames for the community to begin with, which are critical to understand how their frames evolved in the face of change. I turn now to describing the empirical case, data collection and analysis, and how I categorized members into three member-types (core, peripheral, and new members) based on levels of commitment and timeline of involvement. This sets the stage for the findings which highlight how and why reframing occurred with core, peripheral, and new members respectively.

Table 1 Interviewee demographics

Interview type	N	%
CF member	44	73%
Non-CF member at Western	3	5%
Campus minister / religious life staff	7	12%
Longitudinal interviews with CF members	6	10%
Demographic categories (n = 47, excludes campus ministers)		
Gender		
Man	22	48%
Woman	24	52%
Race/ethnicity		
Asian	16	35%
Black	6	13%
Hispanic / Latino	3	7%
Native American	3	7%
White	14	30%
Mixed / Other	4	9%
International student		
Yes	5	11%
No	41	89%
Identify as FLI (first generation and/or low income)		
Yes	12	24%
No	34	74%

Case and Methods

The Case

I draw on the case of a collegiate religious fellowship that went from being physically proximate to physically distant during the coronavirus pandemic (thus using religion as site rather than category [Guhin 2014]). This analysis exists within a broader research project that examines how deeply religious students navigate their college journeys within a prestigious, private university ("Western") that they typically consider to be quite secular. Christian Fellowship ("CF") has approximately 70 members in any given year, and members are diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and political orientation (compared to other religious groups on campus and religious communities in general). Table 1 provides an overview of interviewee demographics, which are generally representative of the broader group.

Almost all students moved home in March 2020, and most of them did college remotely for the 2020-21 academic year. Students were geographically scattered – some even moving out of the country to live with their families overseas. But their institutional status remained the same: they were still undergraduates

at Western. CF continued to operate as a collegiate fellowship with services, life groups, and other gatherings moving from in-person to Zoom. The pandemic created an exogenous, unexpected shock, making this a strong case of spatial change.[6] In the sections that follow, I briefly describe CF on campus (e.g., in "settled times"[7]), their shift to a remote format, and how participation evolved in the face of this shift. I then discuss my process for collecting and analyzing observational and interview data, as well as how I categorized members into three different member types (core, peripheral, and new members).

CF in Settled Times When I began fieldwork in September 2019, I visited CF's weekly worship gathering, which had approximately 40 students in attendance. Attendees hugged, prayed for, and teased each other, lingering long after the meeting ended to chat, putting off their problem sets that were due at midnight. Half a dozen students came up to greet me (a newcomer), inviting me to their life groups and their fall retreat scheduled for the following weekend. Given that CF is embedded within a prestigious American university where time is scarce and students are often "overcommitted," this communal ethos struck me as countercultural. I learned that the group's strategy to make their religious beliefs compelling to their broader campus (where most people are not evangelical Christians) is to cultivate a family-like atmosphere with a dense web of social ties. The campus minister told stories about non-religious students who joined the group because they observed how CF members "loved one another" and wanted to have such friendships. Most students I interviewed cited community as CF's greatest strength.

The group is marked by both communal and personal intimacy. Core members are attached to the group itself as their primary source of community in college, and they are attached to specific co-members who they consider to be their closest friends. Because the shared purpose is religious and most members consider faith to be their most important identity, the group has a strong, shared moral order (Vaisey 2007) as well as a dense network of strong ties that extends out to incorporate weaker ties as well (Granovetter 1973).

[6] Of course, a global pandemic is a rare event that affects multiple aspects of members' lives. In the discussion, I address the scope conditions, limitations, and potential insights this case offers for considering other collective changes that may be experienced by other kinds of communal organizations.

[7] Swidler (1986) develops two models of cultural influence for settled and unsettled cultural periods, arguing that culture influences action in settled periods by providing resources from which people can construct diverse lines of action, while in unsettled periods, explicit ideologies govern action. She later expands on this distinction, arguing that individual lives vary in terms of whether they are "examined or unexamined" (Swidler 2001, Chap. 3). As discussed in the theoretical framework, unsettling circumstances often require examining one's assumptions and frames of a situation and developing more robust accounts for action that previously could be taken for granted (Scott and Lyman 1968). I use the terms "settled" and "unsettled" times as a shorthand to describe group life prior to the onset of the pandemic and after.

Like most organizations, CF has both core and peripheral members. Seth, one of the student leaders, explained CF's member types as follows:

> **Seth**: I kind of think of CF as, there's the core people and then there's the regular CF people. And then there's the fringy CF people.
> **Interviewer**: And the core are the people who are at everything?
> **Seth**: Yes. These are people like Mara and Isaac [lists other names]. These are people who are...You see them a lot in CF and who are committed to CF.
> **Interviewer**: Are first years ever in the core, or do you have to wait and see if they stick around?
> **Seth**: I would not put frosh [first years] in the core. And Greg [the campus minister] doesn't either. He doesn't ever think of a frosh as committed to CF. Even sophomores are usually not in the core…

Core members are deeply committed and frame CF as "a beautiful community." Peripheral members are less committed, and frame CF as "one of many commitments."

Shared physical space plays a critical role in allowing CF to foster a strong community. Most Western students (>90%) live on campus for all four years. Beyond CF gatherings, members have serendipitous interactions through being in the same classes, eating at the same dining halls, and working out at the same gyms. In some sense, co-living on campus is even more intense than in neighborhoods because elite, private universities are near-total, quasi-sovereign institutions where most aspects of life - work, play, civil society, the intimate sphere - co-occur on campus (Eaton and Stevens 2020; Goffman 1968; Stevens et al. 2008).

Flavia, one of the few core members who did have substantial social commitments outside of CF, explained to me:

> If you wanted to do something with CF, you could do something every day. It's insane…Most students at Western would never sign up for that. They are like, "I don't have that kind of time." But CF somehow manages to have well attended events pretty much every day of the week.

She listed out a typical week: church Sunday, large group Monday, life group Wednesday, prayer meeting Friday, and game night Saturday. I watched this high frequency of interaction play out over the first 6 months of in-person fieldwork. For example, before going to large group, I would see CF members in the dining hall, eating together. Then, members would linger after group, breaking off into smaller subsets to work on homework, or grabbing late night meals at Western's burger joint. Members were often roommates with each other, and one house had an open-door policy where any CF member could come visit anytime. When attending life group, I observed other CF life groups co-occurring nearby (on the floor where all the campus religious organizations have offices). In short, propinquity, composition, and configuration all worked together for CF members (Small and Adler 2019), fostering a thick community with a strong sense of purpose. At the same time, CF's

structural features as an open, voluntary organization meant that CF always maintained multiple member-types, where peripheral and prospective members participated alongside deeply committed core members.[8]

An Unsettling Shift to Community Scattered In March 2020, the president of the university announced that students heading home for spring break should bring their important belongings because it was unclear when they would be able to return to campus. I attended CF's final, in-person worship gathering on March 11:

> The tone of large group was heavy tonight, as students weighed the decision of whether to go home, many preparing to do so. Passion was high as students belted out songs. For the last song, Esther said: "sing this as a praise to God, praising him with all that you are." The campus minister chimed in: "This may be your last song with CF for a very long time, so be sure to give it your all." The leaders put down instruments, leaving only a chorus of voices. At the end, there was a pregnant pause. After a moment, Brad turned to Esther and said, "I can just feel God so palpably in this room. I can *feel* Him!" (Field notes)

The very next week, they had their first remote gathering on Zoom. The change was significant:

> Twenty-six students attended; half had their videos on. Ruth played opening songs; a few others sang while muted. The gap between this and last week's singing was stark. Greg gave a short devotional, then put people in breakout rooms for prayer. In person, prayer is embodied: a student stands close to a friend, puts an arm around their shoulder, and they pray together. The breakout room, by contrast, was awkward. Kari had her video off and said she couldn't talk but would write in the chat. Lila followed - she did not want to talk either. Rea responded that her laptop was about to die, so she may drop off at any point. Back with the entire group, Greg closed the "official" gathering but invited folks to stay on and keep talking. He did a round of check-ins, asking individuals how they are doing. The easy flow of lingering conversations that happen after a normal meeting was replaced with a single, stilted conversation. Individuals petered out slowly, but a core group stayed on to talk well into the night. (Field notes)

Most of Western's student groups stopped meeting entirely – some for a month, others for a year. CF, in contrast, chose to persist and adapted rapidly to an online format.

[8] Because CF is an open, voluntary organization that does not have a competitive recruitment and selection process (as sororities and fraternities do), CF has both core and peripheral members. The latter includes people trying out CF but unsure of whether they will commit, people who are involved with CF but prioritize other commitments, and people whose spiritual beliefs or behaviors do not align easily with CF, leading them to be wary of deep involvement. CF is like other sites of voluntary commitment on campuses and in society (intramural sports, political groups, hobby-based groups, etc.) but distinct from groups with competitive entrance processes and mandatory involvement. While these groups may have greater uniformity in member involvement, there often still exists a distinction between the "core" and the "periphery" of any group. Effler (2010), for example, describes a similar dynamic of core and peripheral members in the two social movement organizations she studied.

The group's main offerings, such as weekly worship gatherings, life groups, and prayer gatherings moved to Zoom, a video conference platform. They attempted to recreate informal social gathering space through online game nights. Doing religious activities online is challenging, because embodiment is a fundamental aspect of religious practice (Ammerman 2020). Some sacraments, such as baptism or communion, cannot transfer online. Other practices, such as musical worship and prayer, can persist, but much of the effervescence of embodied, collective rituals is lost in an online format.

Given these dynamics, I expected CF attendance at group gatherings would decline rapidly, as students either focused on their closest friends or reconnected with physically proximate communities in their hometowns. In an interview, I asked the campus minister if he was worried that involvement with CF would decline. He was optimistic:

> You'll appreciate this sociologically. When people have to sacrifice for a community it strengthens the community. And so, the fact that CF is less convenient now means that it's more significant that people are prioritizing it. To the extent that they are…So I would say, and this is still up in the air, how much this is gonna work out numerically.

But he also described potential challenges and limitations:

> What is missing, I think, is serendipity. Both on the community front and the evangelism front. On the community front, the way the relationships are built is a combination of planned and unplanned occurrences, right? That is, if you were involved in CF for four years as an undergrad, and all you ever did was come to large group and life group - you probably would graduate and hopefully have fond memories of us, but you would not graduate with "*my best friends are in CF*." That's part of the framework. But there's also got to be the, you're in the dining hall, and you say: "oh, hey, hey, you!" Then you sit down and have lunch together. And then you wind up with taking a class one day together, you happen to be in the same study groups, all these little incidental things that that life is woven out of. That's going to happen much less organically this quarter.

In short, Greg expected the possibility of increased commitment, but also challenges on the "community front" due to loss of serendipity. What played out over the months to follow was puzzling. Many, but not all, core members quickly dropped off, many becoming disengaged. Simultaneously, peripheral members whose commitment to CF was ambivalent while on campus deepened their engagement, some becoming core members. Further, some new members joined the CF community online who had not been involved with CF on campus. The goal of the empirical analysis was to uncover why these participation patterns evolved as they did.[9]

[9] These trends raise the question of what typical participation in organizations during college is. While this question has not received systematic evaluation, existing research on other college student groups (and my own observations) suggest a general trend from wide-ranging participation early in college that narrows to a smaller set of commitments as students identify their primary community and extra-curricular commitments. Thus, major changes in organizational commitments become less common as students' progress through college. (For additional research, see Chambliss and Takacs 2014; Binder and Wood 2014, and Magolda and Ebben Gross 2020.)

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethnographic fieldwork began in fall 2019, which allowed me to conduct 6 months of participant observation when the group was in person, providing a baseline to observe how member participation changed when the group shifted to a virtual format in March 2020.[10] Both in-person and remote fieldwork consisted of participating in the weekly rhythms of the community (large group worship gatherings, small group bible studies, etc.), one-off events, and informal social gatherings. I also participated in the student leadership team's weekly meetings, which provided insights on what leaders were grappling with as they sought to support the overall community. On average, I participated in 2–3 group events or meetings per week from September 2019 to May 2021. The shift to doing remote fieldwork involved spending more time on the shared communication platforms (GroupMe, then Slack) and conducting more interviews because informal, serendipitous interactions with members became less common. Because the group moved its regular meetings to an online, videoconferencing format, my weekly rhythms of fieldwork and participant observation stayed relatively consistent (though joining Zoom rooms rather than physical gatherings on campus).

In terms of positionality, I am a White woman and a Christian. Identifying as a Christian was important for access and trust-building in the community, while also allowing me to authentically participate in community rituals (Desmond 2008). Members of the group were aware of my research project and saw me as both a co-member and researcher. They regularly asked me about what I was finding, and occasionally reached out to me to tell me about social dynamics in the group they thought I would find interesting, particularly as they grappled with the shift to a remote format. Throughout the fieldwork, jottings and field notes were written during and after each interaction with the group. I wrote analytic memos on what was happening with the group and how it changed over time, both in terms of group rituals and individual members' involvement.

In addition to ethnographic observations, I conducted 50 interviews with students involved in CF (35 of which took place after students were sent home) and 10 additional interviews with campus ministers and other students to gain broader insights on how various groups experienced member shifts during the pandemic. In selecting interviewees, I engaged in theoretical sampling to maximize diversity along various dimensions, including demographic characteristics, role in the organization, and year in school (Small 2009). I intentionally interviewed students who dropped off as well as those who became more involved to understand how these trajectories varied. Given the broader project scope mentioned above, interviews addressed a wide range of topics including respondents' religious identities and other identities, their college journeys, and their reflections on and involvement with CF and other groups on campus. I asked students to reflect on how CF was navigating the pandemic and how their participation had evolved during the pandemic. All formal interviews

[10] Due to my ethnographic approach, the primary outcome of interest, shifts in participation patterns, are based on observations rather than self-reports which is helpful for linking what members said with what they did (Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

were recorded and transcribed verbatim (conducted in person prior to the pandemic and via Zoom afterwards). I also wrote field notes on phone calls, walks, and other one-on-one meetings with members.

The analysis of interviews and field notes was abductive in nature, focused on the "pragmatic process of puzzling out and problem solving" (Tavory and Timmermans 2012, 167). I used both field observations and interviews to classify participants into three types: core members, peripheral members, and new members (in this case, people whose involvement with CF began during the pandemic). I then categorized members by their involvement trajectories (again, relying on both interview and observational data). Finally, I analyzed different frames members used to describe CF and asked questions (primarily in interviews) that would enable me to analyze how their perspectives on CF evolved over time. Simultaneously, I wrote field notes on how social dynamics shifted in worship gatherings, life group gatherings, informal social events, and communication platforms. I engaged in multiple rounds of coding field notes and interview data (using Excel and Dedoose to organize quotes and field note excerpts), beginning with general codes (such as any mention of the COVID-19 pandemic) then eventually creating specific, analytic codes that described members' frames of the community before and after the shift, their reflections on the opportunities and limitations of CF's remote offerings, and their strategies for building and maintaining relationships during the pandemic. Overall, fieldwork observations were particularly useful for observing shifts in participation, how the community adapted, and how community-level frames were negotiated and put forth, especially by leaders. Interviews were essential for understanding how members thought about the shift, the community, and their involvement (Pugh 2013). By engaging in ethnographic interviewing, I was able to bring immersive knowledge gleaned from fieldwork to bear in interviews and create opportunities for revisiting past participation and anticipating future participation (Rinaldo and Guhin 2022), which played a central role in my analysis of how and why reframing occurs.

Findings

I find that reframing occurs when members experience a dissonance between past frames and present circumstances, present circumstances and imagined futures, or all three.[11] In the face of a collective shift, neither reframing nor frame maintenance was a given. In settled times, deep participation (for core members), casual participation (for peripheral members), and non-participation (for nonmembers) was often taken for granted. But in the face of change, members in each type had to answer: *how will I participate now?* Participating in CF on campus is inherently different

[11] Past frames and imagined futures are both more stable than present circumstances, where unexpected changes can occur. Past frames and imagined futures also tend to be linked. If one's past frame for a group is that it is a beautiful community, their future anticipation is likely that it will continue to be such indefinitely. When people experience changes or unexpected circumstances arise, past frames and future anticipations are often destabilized. Taken-for-granted schemas suddenly stop working. This process triggers reconsideration, which can lead to reframing or frame maintenance.

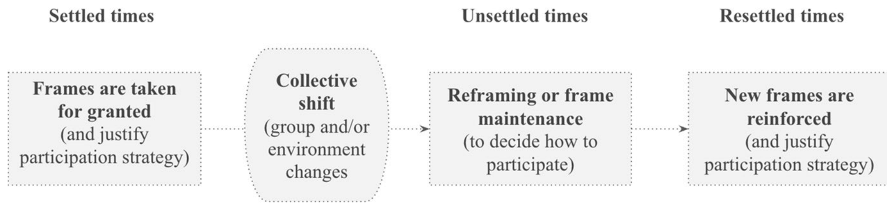

Fig. 1 A processual model of the relationship between frames and action in settled and unsettled times

from participating in CF online, from one's home. To make initial decisions about participation (e.g., will I join this Zoom worship service?), members used their frames for CF as a guide. But frames that worked on campus did not transfer easily to the new environment, which led many members to reframe and change their participation strategies, either deepening participation or dropping off. Not all members reframed: some engaged in frame maintenance and renewal, and their participation strategies remained consistent. The relationship between framing and participation is iterative, as people seek to justify and rationalize their actions (Scott and Lyman 1968). Thus, core members who began to disengage needed to shore up their accounts of CF as "not what it once was" to justify this strategy. Those who deepened their engagement needed to justify why CF suddenly became worthy of their time and energy when it had not been on campus. (I outline this overarching model in Fig. 1.) Given that the process of justification has been well treated elsewhere (Scott and Lyman 1968; Vaisey 2009), my focus is on the process of reframing (and frame maintenance) that guided initial participation decisions in the wake of change.

Core Members: Moving on When Frames Break Down

Though many members disengaged when CF shifted to an online format, I was most perplexed by core members dropping off, such as Mara and Isaac. On campus, Mara and Isaac framed CF as a beautiful community worth sacrificing for. Mara told me that she "could not imagine her college experience without CF." She expressed disappointment that other CF core members "only hang out with each other" rather than acting as mentors for younger students and reaching out to new members. Mara and Isaac were looked up to as CF leaders, and they both expressed their commitment to "leave a legacy" at Western through their involvement in CF. Isaac proposed to Mara the month before the pandemic hit, and they attributed their romantic relationship to their co-involvement in CF.

Mara and Isaac were seniors. The fact that they would transition out of CF was not in itself surprising. What was perplexing was the *timing* of their disengagement (months before graduation) and the ways that their frames for CF changed. For example, Mara told me on a phone call, "I have felt really disengaged [from CF] this quarter…it feels like it's time to move on from Western." She explained to me that she sees herself as being in a "totally different life stage" from others in the group, and "there is nothing more to gain from CF" (interview, 4-19-2020). While on campus, Mara had focused almost exclusively on how much she could *give* to

CF; here she expresses that there is “nothing more to gain.” While on campus, deep engagement in CF’s weekly rhythms was taken for granted. But when large group moved to Zoom, she stopped attending. The lens through which she saw CF changed from *beautiful community* to *not what it once was*. Reframing was triggered by temporal disconnect - CF on Zoom, for Mara, was a shadow of what CF had been on campus. Past frames and present experiences of CF were irreconcilable, and Mara disengaged.

Isaac also engaged in reframing when he experienced temporal dissonance between past frames and present circumstances. I asked him, in April, whether and how his involvement with CF had changed. He replied, “I kind of feel like I’m on the way out anyway. And it is really sad cause you didn’t really get to say goodbye, there’s no closure at all.” He went on to say:

> I think that CF is doing an interesting job because, where I am right now, I don’t really feel like talking to people that much. Yet, I still want to tune into CF, and I look forward to that. It’s been cool seeing how well life groups work online. Which is a surprise to me.

In person, Isaac was gregarious and charismatic. He easily worked the room of any CF gathering, hugging friends, telling jokes, and adding audible commentary in the middle of sermons when he saw fit. Thus, his disengagement from the social aspect of the group (where he would watch Greg’s sermon but skip the Zoom lobby afterward) was surprising. To understand this shift, we must understand how his frame for CF changed. He told me:

> You start to…a lot of my friends when I was in CF before were older people. Since my freshman year, I’ve really enjoyed hanging out with these older guys that have a lot of wisdom that I can learn from. And so, this year as a whole has kind of felt like…most of my closest friends are now graduated. I still - I still love people. And I know a lot of people and have been getting to know a lot of them. And they’re always the people in your class too…But I guess they don’t feel gone to me yet.

Isaac begins “you start to…”, and then trails off, explaining how CF is different now than it was in past years. Reframing, in this case, involves a shift in focus. In any situation, people attend to certain things and disattend others.[12] Isaac became focused on something that had been true all year: his older friends had graduated. On campus, this fact was peripheral, and, if anything, created opportunities for mentoring younger students. Thus, he disattended the reality that his closest friends had graduated. But, when CF moved online, this fact suddenly became salient. He reframes the entire year as the year where his friends had already graduated, which both fuels and justifies his disengagement.

Core members who were not seniors also disengaged when CF moved online. Like Mara and Isaac, they tended to view CF as a uniquely beautiful community

[12] Goffman (1974:202) defines disattending as “the withdrawal of all attention and awareness” but disattending need not be so absolute.

on campus prior to the pandemic. For example, Foundin (a junior) said: "CF is the absolute best thing on the planet." Finny (a junior) told me about his role in the group prior to the pandemic:

> At one point I felt pretty strongly that I wanted to, and should, invest in creating some sense of community [in CF]. So, it's a lot of trying to get people together, which, I don't think was the only contributing factor, but looking back I do think it was helpful, because we do have a pretty tight class group, at least for the juniors. As time went on, it's just less pressing of an issue, because once we had that done, it's kind of like, I'm not particularly motivated to try to create community for a super broad circle - even though I still think it's a good thing. It's just hard when you live with your three best friends, which is really fun.

Like Mara and Isaac, Finny saw himself as someone who played an integral role in making CF a beautiful community. This highlights an important point: members' frames of the community are closely interconnected with how the community allows them to see themselves. The more central a group is for one's own sense of purpose, the more likely one is to frame the group as beautiful, transcendent, and worth sacrificing for. A spatial shift not only changes how a community operates; it can also change the position and centrality of core members. Finny said: "most of the people that I talk to are still CF people, but the size of my social circle has shrunk considerably because there's just only so much time in a day." He participated in fewer events and stayed in touch with fewer co-members. He explained that he chose to focus on spatially proximate relationships instead:

> I feel very fortunate because I get along really well with my parents. And hanging out with them is like what I was saying before, living in the Quad with my three best friends. Now, I feel like I am just living with two of my best friends, my sisters, so it's kind of like I don't feel the need to connect to other people like I do at Western.

As in the other examples, Finny outlines how his present circumstances introduce a disconnect with his working lenses for CF, and more broadly, what it means to experience community. Finny realizes that living with his family provides a similar sense of community as living in the Quad with his best friends. Before, Finny framed the depth of community he experienced on campus as unique to CF. But at home, he realized that he could have a similar experience of community with his own family. The transcendence of CF was lost; reframing was needed. In turn, his participation in CF declined. Amid disconnect between present situations and prior experiences, the frames these core members had of CF as a beautiful community could not be easily sustained. Thus, core members adopted new frames of CF as "not what it once was" or "one of many possible communities" that both influenced and justified lower levels of participation.

Not all core members reframed and dropped off. Some maintained their high participation levels, and even strengthened their commitment to CF. For example,

Diego (a junior) remained equally engaged in group events during the pandemic, attending large group and life group every week online. Like Mara and Isaac, Diego prioritized mentorship over friendship and had a strong sense of purpose as a mentor for younger students in the group. But unlike other core members, Diego did not experience the same degree of temporal disconnect when CF moved online. Diego had faced interpersonal challenges in CF: his first year in college, he and Finny had a falling out and his junior year was marked by ongoing conflict with Seth, the CF president. Thus, while Diego saw CF as his core community and as a beautiful community, his frame for CF was not infused with the same transcendence experienced by other core members for whom the pandemic created a sharp disconnect. Given that he had experienced CF as an imperfect community since his first year, the new imperfections and challenges that came with a spatial shift were easier for him to adapt to. He renewed his frame of CF as his core community and his participation remained consistent throughout the pandemic and even continued after he graduated.

For other core members, frame renewal occurred when they were given new opportunities and responsibilities. For example, Esther (a sophomore) who lived with her family in Belgium during the pandemic, explained that she was "bumped up leadership-wise" because Greg chose her to help him coordinate events for other international students. Participating was especially challenging for international students, because of time zone differences, and many (like Finny) disengaged. But because Esther had a strong sense of purpose as a leader, she was able to renew her frame of CF as her core community. For example, she often joined large group at 4AM local time in addition to attending the special events for international students, highlighting her high commitment.

Overall, these findings suggest that core members' frames for CF broke down when they experienced a disconnect between present circumstances and past frames which triggered reframing and participation shifts. Reframing was heightened if members began to envision futures that did not include CF, which was most common for seniors. These findings reveal that the most positive frames and deepest commitments can be the hardest to sustain in the face of change. But this is not always the case: core members who did not experience temporal disconnect were able to renew their frames of CF as a beautiful community and sustain high participation amidst change.

Peripheral Members: Moving in When New Frames Emerge

Core members moving on was not the only perplexing shift in CF. Peripheral members also moved in. This was surprising because CF could not offer as much of a community online. Why would CF online be more compelling to peripheral members than it was on campus? I start this section with the case of Corina, who became a core member when CF shifted to an online format. Corina's case is striking because she was a senior when the pandemic hit yet stayed involved past the graduation of her cohort.

Corina had spent her first three years of college involved with Hope Ministry (another Christian fellowship on campus) but became disillusioned with the

group and sought a new fellowship her senior year. In explaining her decision to increase her involvement with CF as it shifted to an online format, she told me:

> What I really enjoy about CF is I feel like I can get poured into so much. I feel like people are praying for me, and I know people are praying for me in a way that I didn't get the impression of in Hope. I also feel like I get to contribute wisdom and little nuggets. My life group has gotten a lot closer since quarantine.

Core members compared the online experience of CF to the experiences they had had of CF in person. Corina compares her online experience of CF to the (lack of) community she experienced with Hope. On campus, she had been ambivalent about CF. But at home, during quarantine, CF gatherings became uniquely valuable to her as "what she had left." Because CF persisted during a challenging time, she came to see the community as beautiful, and began investing significant time in group events.

Another CF member who moved in, Mateo, was a freshman when the pandemic hit. Unlike most core members whose primary social commitment on campus was CF, Mateo had a robust social life with his dorm friends. We were in the same life group, which met on Friday evenings. Halfway through group, he would start checking his phone and looking at the door. "Sorry to leave early, all," he would interject during a lull in the conversation. "But I've got to get this basketball game…" There were some freshmen who seemed likely to become the next "core" for CF. Mateo was not one of these: he was as comfortable drinking beer with dormmates as he was at worship gatherings. While some made plans to live with other CF members their sophomore year, Mateo prioritized dorm friends.

Things changed after CF moved online, and Mateo's uptick in participation was as surprising as Mara's early exit. Mateo became more committed to life group, lingering long after the official meeting ended and joining a Bible reading plan with Diego, his life group leader. By Diego's recommendation, he was invited to join the leadership team as a representative of the sophomore class. He quickly became one of the core members of CF. Mateo explained to me in an interview:

> CF for me was literally two hours a week [on campus]. I didn't know a lot of people outside my life group until spring, when Western was canceled. The dorm was a big source of social events and community in general – until I realized that [the dorm] is not a lasting community. There is nothing that binds us besides we live in the same place for X amount of time. The community broke down after COVID hit. That's when I realized, I need to invest more in CF, because this is a community that lasts beyond years, and has a central devotion to God that is strong and that doesn't go away after you go home. Out of all the clubs that I was in, the only one that met after COVID was CF.

Just as students like Mara, Isaac, and Foundin saw CF as a transcendent community, Diego initially saw his dorm as a transcendent community. But dorm-based relationships fizzled out when co-living stopped. This disconnect led Diego to

reframe the dorm as "not a lasting community." Likewise, his framing of CF shifted – from "one of many commitments" to a community that "lasts beyond years." Because Diego did not experience transcendent community in CF before the pandemic, he was deeply impressed with the post-pandemic offerings (which fell flat for many core members). He told me, with a chuckle, "whereas before Western provided community on its own, now we [CF] are offering a product that is even more in demand than it was on campus."

This type of reframing played out with several others. Lola, a first-generation college student, was similar to Mateo. In life group, she chatted with other women about how she loves dorm parties and her dorm friends. Her initial perspective on CF was positive, but ambivalent. She told me, "I love CF, but sometimes it does feel like it's a safe haven for Christians who feel like they can't be friends with non-Christians." But when the pandemic hit, CF was what Lola had left. This was especially pronounced because she took a gap year after struggling academically with remote classes. She expressed in an interview:

> CF was a really big community during the time of being home for COVID. I definitely was going to services every week and life group was super helpful. And it just helped me maintain that sense of normalcy and friendships.... My sophomore year, I'm on a gap year, a leave of absence. My CF friendships have been the one that I've maintained the most. And I've actually gotten closer to some people at CF through being online than I was on campus, which has been cool.

Lola's perspective of CF shifted because it met a crucial need (enabling her to maintain a connection to Western) while she was on a leave of absence. She reframed CF as a beautiful community, rather than one she was ambivalent about, because CF played a new role in her life during her leave of absence. Before, she thought CF pulled Christian students *away* from campus culture. But during the pandemic, CF allowed her to *maintain* a tie to Western that was otherwise impossible during a leave of absence. When the leave ended, and she returned to campus, CF continued to be her core community, which occurred with Mateo as well. In both cases, the temporal disconnects between their frames of CF while on campus (as one of many commitments) and CF during the pandemic (as their only commitment that continued to provide community) led them to reframe CF as a beautiful community worth sacrificing for, propelling them to become core members.

Not all peripheral members engaged in reframing, though the frame of CF as "one of many commitments" was generally difficult to sustain during the pandemic. Thus, peripheral members tended to drop off entirely or deepen their engagement and commitment to CF. Both shifts required reframing, but the reframing that led to deepened commitment was a more significant shift. For example, I asked Addi, a peripheral member, "what has your involvement in CF looked like since the pandemic started?" He replied: "Not at all, I haven't been going to CF at all." I asked him whether this had to do with the virtual format, and he replied: "Yeah, I feel like it's weird. I am learning about theology, using the internet and stuff, but having to do meetings…CF just doesn't seem as appealing to me." His frame shifts in that he sees CF as *less* appealing, but to him this is an intuitive change given CF's shift to a

virtual format. Frame renewal thus may be particularly applicable to core members (for whom commitment was taken for granted and reframing requires a significant perspective shift). By contrast, for peripheral members, viewing CF as less appealing online and, therefore, dropping off is an intuitive shift. By contrast, reframing CF as a beautiful community and deepening participation required a greater perspective shift, which was instigated by more intense experiences of temporal disconnect.

New Members: Reframing to Reconcile Present and Future

Even more surprising than peripheral members becoming core members were the new members who joined CF during the pandemic. For example, consider Kevin (a junior), who in six months of in-person observations, I had never seen at CF. During the first month in which CF had shifted to an online format, Kevin became one of the most active and committed participants in Zoom gatherings. In an interview, he explained:

> My first few years at Western, I was not very involved in CF. It didn't start until this year, that I was super involved. But what was really amazing about CF for me was that everyone was super, super nice to me. [Later in the interview] Communicating with friends across the country is really, really hard. And CF has worked really hard to make sure that we all stay together as a tight-knit community. We have the zoom lobby after [gatherings] and we talk till 12:30 AM. It's very similar to the college experience that I always…that I've had, and I have always wanted.

As with peripheral members, CF provided a way for Kevin to maintain his connection to Western, despite his physical distance from the campus. Beyond that, it also met his need for friendship. He said: "CF has filled the whole missing friend void in my life." While core members focused on all that had been lost in the shift to a remote format, students like Kevin experienced CF online as a tight knit, "amazing" community where conversations lasted deep into the night. The temporal disconnect that pulls newcomers like Kevin into CF is distinct from core and peripheral members as it centers primarily on a disconnect between present situations and imagined futures. Kevin frames CF as a "tight-knit community" because it enables the college experience that he has always wanted, an experience that the pandemic roadblocked. When there is a disconnect between present experience and imagined futures, people seek new opportunities for community that can resolve this dissonance.

Cal, who was also a junior when the pandemic hit, had a similar trajectory as Kevin (uninvolved prior to the pandemic, then increasingly involved during the pandemic). He said:

> I'll be honest, I've actually been really enjoying these zoom worship sessions. And the life groups and the random community time after watching the livestream together. I've been really getting to know people a lot more, I've been getting a lot closer to people. Because, for context, I basically wasn't part of CF for the first two years of being at Western, which means all the friend-

> ships that people form early on - I was kind of trying to jump in from the outside. So, I've always felt like an outsider in the group. And so, zoom as a format, just - you can't really have cliques over zoom, you know, you get put in a breakout room and you're just in that breakout room of people, you have good conversation, you pray for each other. It's a very positive experience.

The remote format CF embodied during the early months of the pandemic brought unique affordances (Evans et al. 2017; Davis and Chouinard 2016). While some core members (like Isaac) experienced their central position in the group being flattened online, new members like Cal and Kevin benefitted from the equal opportunities for participation and breakdown of cliques. Here, too, we see how framing comes into play for divergent interpretations of common experiences. While core members framed randomized breakout rooms as a failure to achieve the organic community CF had in person, newcomers saw this as a "very positive experience," as Cal said. Cal had no need for CF on campus: he had formed a strong community with a set of peers and faith was on the backburner. But when that peer group became physically disconnected, Cal sought out a new communal environment and renewed his interest in participating in a faith-based community.

The final example I highlight in this section is Autumn, a junior who had never attended a CF gathering prior to the pandemic, nor been involved with any sort of religious fellowship during college. She explained her entrance to CF as follows:

> It was during that time [spring 2020] that I felt really open to new things. And once I got an email from Ellie about the pen pal thing.[13] I was like, I love writing letters. I would love to do that. And it would also be cool to get involved with CF somehow because it was always in the background in my mind like "okay, CF, a little bit shy. I don't know what this is about." And I also lived across the hall from Esther - I never reached out to her but she always had a sign on her door that said "ask me about God" or something. I was always really close to asking her about God and wanting to go to one of those worship nights. But I don't know why, something stopped me every time. So, I'm just really grateful for that openness during that time.

Whereas Kevin framed CF as a beautiful community because it filled a friend void and loved the Zoom gatherings, Autumn valued the potential for a more tentative entrance to the group that was created by spatial distance. But upon entering, she quickly came to frame CF as a beautiful community. She told me:

> I wasn't sure what life group was going to be like, through zoom especially, and the minute I joined, I just felt so welcomed. And such a warm community - that just really was impressed upon me. And I wasn't expecting that at all. And I just felt like, 'ah, why, why didn't I join this years ago?' It felt really special.

Autumn engaged in reframing, because CF was warmer and less intimidating than she had imagined the group would be when she lived on campus. While she

[13] Autumn received an email because she was on CF's listserv, even though she had never been to a CF event.

was hesitant about a digitally mediated small group, it exceeded her expectations, leading her to see CF as a "special" and beautiful community that she wished she had joined long ago.

New members, unlike peripheral and core members, did not have past frames of CF *as a community* – it was simply a student group that they were aware of but uninvolved with. What, then, sparks new commitments? These three cases reveal that new members had visions for imagined futures (Mische 2009) where they could experience deep community with others at Western, though they were unclear about how to actualize these hopes. Some, like Kevin, found themselves in a "friend void" that they actively sought to fill. Others, like Autumn, were simply hopeful for new connections. Through encounters, often serendipitous, with CF (such as receiving an email for a pen-pal program, in Autumn's case), these students came to believe that CF was the answer for the community they sought. They framed CF as a bridge for a disconnect they experienced between present loneliness and future hope for community, not because it was uniquely suited to do so, but simply because it was available when other opportunities had waned.

Overall, these findings reveal that, with each member-type, reframing was triggered by instances of temporal disconnect. Core members reframed when their present experience of CF online failed to measure up to their past experiences of CF as a beautiful, transcendent community, or when new experiences of local community challenged the uniqueness of CF. In either case, reframing was linked to lowered participation, while those who engaged in frame maintenance were able to sustain high participation. (These processes are iterative rather than linear, see Fig. 1 for a summary model.) Peripheral members also reframed when their present experiences of CF did not align with past experiences – but in this case, they came to see CF as a stronger community and a way to connect to Western, rather than a group that pulls students away from the broader culture of Western. Finally, new members reframed CF when they experienced a disconnect between present circumstances and broader hopes for the future and their college years. Because CF was available when many other Western groups had stopped meeting, it allowed students to actualize hopes for an experience of community. Likewise, CF's online format was framed in terms of increased accessibility and inclusivity among newcomers, while it fell flat for many core members.

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of this article is to shed light on how and why people engage in reframing in the face of change. Frame maintenance requires continuity between past frames, present experiences, and future hopes. In unsettled times, this continuity is challenged (Swidler 1986). My findings reveal that reframing is a process of fashioning new working lenses to resolve instances of temporal disconnect, sometimes by reinterpreting the past or creating links between present realities and future hopes. My findings also reveal an alternative to reframing, frame renewal, wherein people refashion past frames to fit them to present circumstances. These findings

advance our understanding of the links between frames and participation in the face of change as well as cultural theorizing on framing as a dynamic process. To conclude, I expand on each of these contributions, the limitations of my approach, and avenues for future research.

How Frames Shape Participation in the Face of Change

My findings add important nuance to the existing premise that highly positive frames sustain high communal participation (Small 2002, 2004) by focusing on how frames evolve in the face of change. While positive frames (and high commitment levels) predict high participation in settled times, I find that deeply positive frames may be particularly difficult to sustain in unsettled times (Swidler 1986). Members who have experienced a group as "a beautiful community" often struggle most to adapt to community-level changes. In the face of sharp temporal disconnect between past frames and present circumstances, they may reframe the group as "not what it once was," which can both fuel and justify lower participation. An alternative process is frame renewal, where people fit past frames to present circumstances. My findings suggest two predictors of frame renewal: taking on leadership roles which engenders purpose and responsibility (as was the case with Esther) and experiencing past challenges that soften one's sense of temporal disconnect (as was the case with Diego). More broadly, temporal disconnect can foster increased participation for peripheral and new members, as they reframe the community as more valuable than they previously thought.

This argument has been developed in reference to a specific case: a collegiate religious fellowship that shifted to a remote format during the COVID-19 pandemic. This case has two scope conditions with regards to the broader question of how group participation can be sustained in the face of collective shifts. First, I focus on participation in a communal organization. As such, these findings are more applicable to other communal organizations, such as civic associations, recreational organizations, churches, and social movement groups, than they are to geographic communities (e.g., neighborhoods) where much existing participation scholarship has taken place (Rosen 2017; Small 2002). Second, the group I studied is embedded within a broader institutional context (a university). While most organizations are embedded in institutional fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012), for a collegiate group, the institutional context is near at hand. Thus, these findings may be particularly relevant for groups nested in broader organizations,[14] as well as other religious or higher education settings (Ammerman 2020; Stevens et al. 2008).

In addition, I focus on a specific kind of collective change: the shift from physically proximate to physically remote due to a global pandemic. Beyond the coronavirus pandemic, there are many instances where communal organizations lose physical space or undergo spatial shifts. For example, nonprofits in urban environments that do not own buildings often face frequent moves and may give up renting a

[14] For example, these findings may be relevant for social movement groups that are embedded within firms (Soule 2012), hospitals (Kellogg 2009), or universities (Soule 1997; Zhao 1998).

building to reduce overhead costs. Further, climate change and natural disasters fundamentally alter physical space in ways that communities must grapple with. How members' frames and participation patterns co-evolve in the face of these challenges is an important area for future research.

Both organizations and neighborhoods undergo other kinds of collective changes wherein the reframing and frame renewal processes theorized here are likely to be relevant. Organizations undergo leader transitions, mission changes, and shifts in institutional contexts. Organization and social movement scholars thus might examine whether members and employees who have the most positive frames for their organizations struggle most with adapting to leader turnover. Likewise, urban neighborhoods regularly undergo processes of gentrification and displacement. Future work could consider how demographic changes affect neighborhood frames, participation patterns, and communal ties (Small and Adler 2019 for a recent analysis along these lines, see Loder and Stuart (2022).

Framing as a Dynamic, Temporal Process at the Micro-Level

While Goffman recognized reframing as a fundamental aspect of frame analysis, he left vague how and why reframing occurs. Answering this question is critical to advancing a fundamental concern in cultural sociology – how culture shapes action (Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009). My argument, that reframing is triggered by instances of temporal disconnect (between past frames and present experiences, present experiences and future hopes, or all three), helps answer why people engage in reframing. Further, my findings shed light on how reframing and frame renewal unfold at the individual level.

Wood et al. (2018) suggest that we think of frames as "situational assemblages of material objects that evoke certain responses from individuals, in part by activating particular sets of schemas." But the dialogue between external frames and internal schemas is not automatic. Framing not only applies to the groups assembling frames; it also occurs within persons as they pull together external and internal information to develop working lenses for how to act in the present (Small et al. 2010). In moments of change, actors reframe or renew frames to evoke the appropriate schemas. Frames make sense of why we act; schemas guide how to act. When schemas stop working as situations present unexpected circumstances, reframing is triggered. Reframing is as one type of what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call practical evaluative agency, where people think through and respond to the dilemmas and ambiguities of evolving situations.

But reframing is not simply about navigating specific situations: it is a cohering process, where people refashion or renew general working lenses that guide action. Through reframing, people establish accounts that make sense of their current strategies of action, especially when these diverge from their past strategies of action (Becker 1960; Scott and Lyman 1968; Swidler 1986). Both reframing and frame renewal enable resettling in unsettled times (Swidler 1986).

Future work is needed to further tease out the dialectical relationship between deliberately chosen frames, easily deployed schemas, and patterns of action. I have

focused on reframing a community, but people reframe other kinds of commitments, such as their core beliefs. Berger (2011), for example, argues that people begin to question the “sacred canopy” within which religious beliefs can be taken for granted when rituals and practices are ruptured. This questioning can lead to doubling down on religious beliefs or changing them, which parallels my findings that group commitments either increase or falter in the face of change.

While longitudinal participant observation enables me to develop an initial model for reframing (see Fig. 1), a fuller understanding of the temporal sequence of framing and action will require broadening and deepening the temporal windows of analysis. Longer time horizons would offer clarity on framing trajectories and the life cycle of reframing efforts. A deep dive into shorter time horizons, via daily interactions or diary entries (Rauch and Ansari 2022; Tavory and Swidler 2009), would allow for increased precision in understanding where exactly reframing occurs “in the action.” Indeed, existing work exemplifies the benefits of analyzing frames over longer (Gould 2009) and deeper (Effler 2010) temporal windows. Continued work in this vein will further our understanding of how cognition, emotion, temporality, and space collectively shape framing processes at micro, meso, and macro levels.

Given my data, it is possible that some instances of reframing that I characterize as driving participation decisions could be justifications for shifts in participation that already occurred (Scott and Lyman 1968). While changes in participation may be unexpected (e.g., a person finds themself avoiding a group they used to love), they are rarely unconscious. The awareness of an unexpected shift in oneself can be precisely what triggers reframing, which involves slow thinking and conscious deliberation (Vaisey 2009). As Vaisey and Valentino (2018) note, bringing the tools of cultural sociology into dialogue with theories of decision-making can advance both fields. This vein of research will require further theorizing on what Goffman calls a “framework of frameworks” – the architecture of individuals’ personal culture, where some frames are primary and others secondary (just as some identities anchor others [Miles 2014]). Finally, I have focused on the triggers of reframing, rather than fully teasing out the relations between new and old frames or the consequences of reframing. Future work could examine why certain relations between old and new frames emerge as well as the cognitive, emotional, and social consequences of reframing.

My argument - that in the face of spatial change, people engage in reframing when they experience temporal disconnect - has broad relevance in modern times. A pandora’s box has opened as people have grown accustomed to working, learning, socializing, and worshiping from home. As organizations reopen their physical doors (or choose to stay remote), the response of their members is ambivalent. Church attendance, for example, is 30–50% lower than it was before the pandemic (Adamy 2021). In the educational realm, as many as 3 million students disappeared in 2020, many of whom are from marginalized groups (Litvinov 2021). In the corporate sector, many companies have made permanent changes to being “virtual first” (Dropbox), declaring “office-centricity over” (Shopify), and allowing people to work “where they are most productive” (Zillow) (Stoller 2021). But the results of these shifts are unclear. For example, remote working conditions may have minimal effects on men but negative effects on professional outcomes for women (Bloom et al. 2022). Some of these broader trends, such as lower church and school

attendance, may be partially attributable to reframing. Reclaiming people could require a strategy that addresses the gaps between prior and present frames, presenting a compelling vision for the future that shows the value of physical co-presence to those who are inclined to "move on." In short, prior frames may need to be renewed and new frames fashioned for participants to return: a critical insight for organizations with dwindling membership and, more broadly, institutions with dwindling trust to reckon with.

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Krystal Laryea is a cultural sociologist and a PhD Candidate at Stanford University. She studies how people and groups foster civic commitments across lines of difference, when and why people's beliefs change, and the strategies that organizations employ to build community and challenge inequalities. Her work can be found in *American Sociological Review, Mobilization, The Journal of Higher Education*, and *Global Perspectives.*