

RESOURCES & NETWORKS

LESSON FOUR



CASCADING LIVES
DIGITAL TOOLKIT





Lesson 4: Resources & Networks

This section introduces students to the array of resources that people use to avoid cascading and downward economic mobility. It then asks students to consider the resources that they have access to in their own lives. Students read biographical stories that highlight different types of resources - such as money, time, friends, family, emotional support, childcare, and unconditional love - and begin to see how not everyone has the same social and economic resources and how collective resources can fill gaps when individual ones cannot.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify types of resources and categorize them as economic, social, or emotional
- Assess one's own personal resources and those of one's family and community
- Create an artistic representation of resources and networks

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What kinds of resources do you have as an individual? As a member of a family, a group, or a community?
- Where do resources come from? How do people create networks? How can people make up for resources when they are missing some?
- What does it take to use resources (asking for help, strong relationships, hard work, comfort in uncertainty, etc.)?

MATERIALS

- Biographical stories for C.Y. and Sharon
- Resource mapping worksheet

CONCEPTS

- **Resources:** We often think of money and material things as resources, but many other assets can be used to help get through a difficult time and thrive. These include personal relationships, group memberships, emotional maturity, spiritual practices, and more.
- **Networks:** We are connected to many people through different experiences and social ties. Sometimes those ties stem from friendship, others through kinship, school, or work. They can be formal or informal and are sustained through give and take.



ACTIVITY 1: MAPPING RESOURCES

Everyone has access to a different collection of resources. These depend on wealth, but also who one knows (their network), where they live, cultural or ethnic heritage and traditions, and education or training.

In small groups, students should read one of the two biographical stories. As they read, they should consider what challenges the person faced and what resources they used to make it through. Then, each student should complete the resource mapping worksheet for the subject of the biographical story and for themselves. Discuss as a class the following questions: Do students have similar resources or different ones? Why might different places have different resources?

Now, help students to work together to figure out what resources they have as a class and community. Place sheets of paper on the wall for each kind of resource. Students can walk around the room and add to those sheets anything that is a resource that they use or that they could offer. When done, discuss the collective resources as a class. What does the class have a lot of? Can everyone access these resources, or are they restricted?

ACTIVITY 2: WHAT IS SUCCESS?

There is a lot more to a fulfilling life than economic success. For this exercise, have students produce an artistic representation of all the resources that someone has assembled in their life. That person could be C.Y., Sharon, another story from the Cascading Lives website, a famous figure, or a fictional character. Draw a horizontal line with one end marking their birth and the other today. Along the way put dots to signify important events. Now, either with art supplies or images cut out of magazines, add representations of the resources in their life.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

- School Segregation: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/learning/lesson-plans/still-separate-still-unequal-teaching-about-school-segregation-and-educational-inequality.html>
- College Completion: <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/13/681621047/college-completion-rates-are-up-but-the-numbers-will-still-surprise-you>
- Unschooling: <https://www.parents.com/kids/education/home-schooling/what-is-unschooling-all-about-child-led-home-education/>

SUGGESTED ANCHOR TEXTS

- *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald
- *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley

THE CASCADING LIVES PROJECT© 2021

We invite you to visit our website, www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives, to access the full Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit. There, you can also find additional resources produced by the Cascading Lives Project.

The correct citation for the Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit is:

Cascading Lives Project 2021. "Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit." Brandeis University. www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives.

CONTACT US

EMAIL:

cascading@brandeis.edu

PHONE:

781-736-2651

MAIL:

Cascading Lives Project
Karen V. Hansen
Department of Sociology
MS 071
Brandeis University
415 South St.
Waltham, MA 02452



Lesson 4: Resources & Networks Stories

C.Y.: NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, MY MOTHER HAS MY BACK

C.Y. is an African American woman in her early forties from southern Georgia. A talented singer, songwriter and artist and the mother of four young children, C.Y. works full-time as a site manager for a low-income apartment complex.

C.Y. was born and raised in a small, racially segregated town in southern Georgia. The railroad tracks that run through the town mark a racial boundary, separating the part of the town in which C.Y. and other African Americans live from the white neighborhoods which are also distinguished by their public services and amenities.

Looking back on her childhood, C.Y. now realizes that her family had been poor: “We were not rich. We were probably in the poverty category.” Her parents both worked in low-wage jobs, her father at an animal feed store and her mother as a seamstress in a factory. Though money was tight, as a child she never felt deprived: “My mother made me feel like we weren’t lacking anything. I never felt that we were poor.” Whether it was by using her sewing skills to create fashions or combing through thrift stores for used toys, her mother always made sure that the children had much of what they wanted. C.Y. also grew up with a sense of security about their home. They lived in the house that her mother had inherited from her own mother. Since they owned a home, they did not have to worry about paying rent or finding a place to live.

C.Y. is a deeply creative and spiritual person who has always forged her own, often unconventional, path. Her mother has always supported her choices. Very early on, her mother recognized her daughter’s musical gifts. C.Y. came out of the womb singing, according to her mother. C.Y.’s first memory is of being two years old, climbing up in the bathroom to look at herself in the mirror as she sang, using her

hairbrush as a microphone. By the time she was sixteen she knew she wanted to be a professional singer and hoped to make a living by performing and recording music.

After high school, C.Y. attended a public university in Georgia, to the great joy of her family and especially her grandmother: “She was so proud of me. I was either *the* first or *one* of the first of her grandchildren to go to college.” In college C.Y. joined a rap group and became immersed in the world of music.

In her sophomore year C.Y. received devastating news. Her grandmother, a pillar of the family, had been stabbed to death by an intruder in her public housing apartment. Twenty years later, the murder remains unsolved. C.Y. feels that the case was never properly investigated by the police.

Traumatized by her grandmother’s brutal death and feeling increasingly detached from her courses, C.Y. decided to leave college and focus her energies on breaking into the music business. She took a retail job in Atlanta to pay for her living expenses while she performed and recorded her own songs. By her late twenties she had signed with an independent record label in California. The company sent her on several tours to promote her music. It was a demanding way of life that C.Y. began to question, especially when she thought about raising children.

C.Y. met a man who she felt was her soulmate. They married and soon she was pregnant with her first child. The birth of her daughter was a moment of profound transformation for C.Y. She felt a deep sense of love and affirmation: “Your mom always tells you, ‘I love you.’ She tries to uplift you. But . . . when you get out in the world as an adult, it doesn’t feel like that,” especially when you are an African American woman living in the South. Having a daughter made her reconsider. “You know what? I am worthy of love.” C.Y. stopped touring and recording and decided to devote herself to raising her little daughter.

After her second child was born, C.Y. thought about returning to college to finish her degree,



but how could she manage caring for her children, holding down a job, and going to college? When her mother offered to help, C.Y. moved back to her childhood home. She and her family could live rent-free, and her mother stepped up to help with childcare, so C.Y. was able to graduate with a bachelor's degree in art.

Over the years, C.Y. has continued to count on her mother for support. Today she and her four children (ages 3, 6, 8, and 11) live with her parents in her childhood home. Her mother has supported C.Y.'s decision to home-school her children. C.Y. is an ardent believer in unschooling, a philosophy that advocates informal learning in which children learn through their natural life experiences, developing their personal interests and curiosity. C.Y.'s own early school years were a negative experience. School was a place where her talents and creativity were not encouraged and were often discouraged. She does not want her children to have the same experiences.

SHARON: I'M GONNA HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF MYSELF, NO MATTER WHAT

Sharon is a 46-year-old white woman who has been working in the restaurant industry since graduating high school. She now lives in Atlanta, supplementing her 40 hour a week position as a cook at a university with a weekend job at a meal delivery service.

When Sharon was a young child, her father was laid off from his job as a chef in a fast food restaurant chain. The family, including Sharon, her parents, and her little sister, went to live with her maternal grandmother in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Sharon remembers this as a "tumultuous time," filled with strife between her mother and father.

When Sharon was ten, her parents divorced. Her mother decided to go back to school to get a degree in nursing and her grandmother, who had always been a big part of their lives, stepped in to take care of Sharon and her sister. As Sharon grew into her teenage years, the caretaking relationship flipped. Sharon found

Earlier this year, after ten years of marriage to a man who cycled in and out of the workforce, C.Y. decided to separate from her husband. Even though she found him to be a good father and continues to see him as her best friend, he had trouble keeping a job and could not support the family. The separation has been heartbreaking for C.Y. She worried about taking care of her children without his help but she's managing with the help of her mother.

Today C.Y. works as a site manager for a low-income housing complex. She monitors the property, addresses tenants' problems, makes sure bills are paid, maintains quiet, and tries to resolve conflicts. At times she faces the fury of tenants who need to vent about the world. But she stays calm, drawing on skills she has cultivated through many years of yoga practice.

Over the years C.Y.'s creativity, strength, and spirituality have enabled her to carve her own unique path in the world. Her mother has been a consistent pillar of support. As C.Y. says: "no matter what happens, my mother has my back."

herself spending more and more time tending to her increasingly feeble grandmother.

During her high school years, Sharon faced a series of losses in quick succession. Her grandmother moved to a nursing home where her health deteriorated sharply and she soon passed away. Then Sharon's father died. Her mother, now working full-time as a nurse, remarried, and Sharon and her sister found themselves living in their stepfather's home in a well-off suburban neighborhood. There she attended a new high school that offered multiple vocational tracks. She began taking courses in culinary arts and discovered that she shared her father's interest in food preparation. In her senior year, she applied and was accepted into a prestigious culinary school in New York. Sadly she couldn't accept the admission offer because of the high cost of tuition, which she was going to have to pay by herself. Her stepfather offered to help but, in exchange, demanded that she



submit to his unyielding house rules. She refused. Anxious to get away, she moved out of the house as soon as she graduated and began working in a restaurant chain.

Sharon exudes an air of responsibility, making it immediately clear that she is a determined person who takes care of business. That unflappable exterior is probably why she got recruited quickly into the management side of restaurant work. As she worked to support herself, she sought out the corporate side of food production rather than moving into high-end fine dining, which is a more volatile business. Corporations that run restaurants often provide security that Sharon finds appealing - health insurance, a retirement account, schedule predictability, and stability. That said, planning menus, cooking, and serving food requires long hours and can be stressful. Despite being robust employers, companies get sold and epidemics can change the business environment - stability is never guaranteed.

Soon after her mother died in 2001, Sharon visited a friend in Atlanta and decided to move south. At the time she had been working as a manager for Wendy's, a large chain restaurant, which has sites in Atlanta, so she was able to transfer. Having a job with the same company and the milder southern climate made her life easier, even though the culture was profoundly different. After settling in, she realized she wanted more training on the food preparation side, and decided to attend a local for-profit culinary school. The school erupted in scandal over its mismanagement, deepening its negative reputation. That said, Sharon has no regrets. In her eighteen months in Atlanta she developed new skills and made new friends.

In the "Great Recession" of 2009, the restaurant industry got rattled and the housing market collapsed. Sharon lost her job and her condo, when falling property values forced her mortgage under water. When she was offered a job working for a corporation that prepared foods for colleges and universities in

Mississippi, she took it and moved. At first, she found the work consuming in a good way. But over time, she found that her entire life was wrapped up in the company and her co-workers, and the stress of working 60 to 80 hours a week took a toll on her health. After four years, she decided to quit and move back to Atlanta.

Again, she sought jobs with workplace benefits, preferring to work for institutions such as schools and hospitals that needed her to do food planning, procurement, and preparation. She did not always find jobs with that ideal package and has been without health insurance for the last five years. She has changed jobs frequently, looking for a better work environment with higher wages, and she often works more than one job at a time because they don't pay well. She aimed to save enough money to buy a house she could call her own, within her means, and hold onto it.

Two years ago, Sharon bought her own home, in an affordable, majority African American town in the Atlanta metro area. She lives alone and treats her house as a "sanctuary," a place she can find peace of mind. She is not in a romantic relationship, and while she is not opposed to one and occasionally enters the online dating scene, she has no interest in getting married. "I'm not one for: *I need somebody in my life*. If you're in my life, I'm completely independent. I do not need you in my world. I want you there. But I don't need to have you there."

She has dear friends who act "like family" to her by being available to help with leaky plumbing, or house sitting, or providing a shoulder to cry on. Her biological family has virtually disappeared - her mother, father, and grandmother are now deceased, and she is estranged from her only sister. While Sharon maintains contact with her former brother-in-law and nephews, she had a falling out with her sister and has no idea where she is or how to contact her. These past relationships hold pain for Sharon, but she has put the disputes and her former life behind her, determined to make her own future.



The coronavirus pandemic has had an outsized impact on the restaurant industry and her employment prospects. Initially, in April 2020, Sharon was laid off and received unemployment benefits. Six weeks later, she found a part-time job on weekends. This woman-owned, small business has come to thrive in the pandemic - it delivers calorie-restricted meals to homes around the Atlanta metro area. Sharon then found a forty-hour job, Monday through Friday, cooking for a fraternity house at a local college. On Friday afternoon, she cleans up her kitchen and heads to the catering center to work another 20 hours through Sunday, preparing food, plating it, and then helping to deliver the meals. Now, she assesses, "I'm not where I wanted to be, I'm not where I thought I was going to be, but in the grand scheme of things, I'm okay. And a lot of people that are in this industry are not."

Because she is on her own, making her way, Sharon has tried to build a nest egg and prepare for unforeseen expenses. She constantly scrambles to get work, pick up extra shifts, and work as much as she can while she is young and healthy enough to keep going. "In the long run, I'm gonna have to take care of myself, no matter what."



Lesson 4: Resource Mapping Worksheet

THINGS:

Such as housing, healthcare, a yard, a bike

INFORMATION:

Such as where to get a good sandwich, how to get into a school

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

Such as a good outlet for frustration, love, and care when you get sick.