

Community and Community Development: An Interactional Perspective*

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Community development is a very appealing idea. Time and again, in Texas and across the nation, community development has been prescribed as a popular means of improving the social, economic, and environmental quality of life for residents of a community. As encouraging as the notion of community development sounds, the *practice* of community development suffers from a lack of systematic theory and a clear understanding of what the community is and how it develops. In order for community development strategies to be viewed as a useful and practical means of improving community well-being in Texas, especially in rural areas, researchers, community developers, and Texas Cooperative Extension personnel must enhance their knowledge and understanding of community and the ways in which communities develop and persist in a society characterized by increasing urbanization, globalization, and demographic change. In this paper I apply an interactional theoretical perspective to the questions surrounding the notions of community and community development.

An Interactional Perspective of Community

An interactional approach to social and personal organization regards social interaction as the substantive element of community. The interactional theory of community views the community as a “field.” It uses the concept of the “community field” to denote the network of social interactions that coordinate the broad locality-oriented interests of the various “social fields” in a “local society.” An understanding of the notion of a local society, awareness of field theory, and recognition of the distinction between a social field and a community field are central for the comprehension of the interactional conception of community.

* Many of the topics covered in this paper were originally expressed and popularized by Kenneth P. Wilkinson in *The Community in Rural America* (1991; New York: Greenwood Press).

Local Society

From an interactional framework, community is a phenomenon that occurs in local societies. A local society is defined as the locality in which a population meets its common daily needs and encounters shared problems. At a minimum, there are three features inherent to any local society. They include: (1) a geographic dimension (i.e., a locality); (2) human life dimension (i.e., people living there); and (3) relatively complete organization (i.e., institutions and patterns of behavior that cover the broad range of human interests). Each feature is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for community. In other words, all three elements are a prerequisite for community, but having all three does not ensure community. Only where these three elements exist does the *potential* exist for community.

To a greater or lesser extent, certain characteristics are manifested in all local societies. These visible features include: a physical location with geopolitical units contained therein, a demographic profile, and social and economic institutions. Each feature varies within and across local societies over time. For example, local societies tend to vary with respect to physical size, the number of geopolitical units or places they contain, and the geographical distance between places. Local societies tend to differ in regard to population size, density, and heterogeneity, along with socioeconomic characteristics. And, local societies generally vary with respect to the quantity and quality of their respective social and economic institutions.

Fields

The interactional perspective of community has its roots in field theory. Fields are conceptualized as emergent, dynamic, boundless wholes. They are emergent in the sense that they are not governed entirely by their constituent components, but rather are the outcome of the interaction of these parts. Fields are dynamic in that they are in a continuous state of change. They are said to be unbounded because they are characterized by their distinguishable focus or core properties rather than physical perimeters that are generally equated with the term “boundary.” And, as a whole, the parts of a field influence one another and include both causes and consequences of focal objects or events. The idea of a field has been used in many scientific disciplines, including physics, biology, psychology, and sociology, to focus attention on dynamic interaction processes.

Social Fields

An interactional theory of community views the community as a social field. A social field is defined as an unfolding, loosely bounded, constantly changing, interconnected process of social interaction displaying unity through time. As a process, a social field is characterized by a sequence of actions over time carried on by actors generally working through various associations. Actions are projects, programs, activities or events in which actors and associations are engaged. Associations are formal organizations and informal groups. Actors are leaders and other persons participating in associations and actions.

In any given local society there are multiple social fields, some of which are more locality-oriented than others. Social fields that are highly oriented to the locality are more likely than their lesser locality-oriented counterparts to be clearly identified with the locality. Moreover, highly locality-oriented social fields tend to involve local residents as principal actors and/or leaders.

Social fields occur in a variety of arenas. Each field is generally marked by its own identity, organization, core interactional properties, and set of specific and/or institutional interests. Examples of common social fields found in many localities include those pursuing interests in education, local government, environmental protection, faith-based services, economic development, and recreation (click on Figure 1 below).

Figure 1.

Community Field

Where social fields in various interest areas converge or overlap, the potential to form a community field exists (click on Figure 2 below).

Figure 2.

The community field is a locality-oriented social field that is related to, yet distinguished from, other activity fields in a local society. Unlike most social fields in a locality which tend to engage in special interests, the community field pursues the interests of the general community. In other words, the interest that guides the community field is an interest in community structure rather than an interest solely in specific goals, such as economic development, service enhancement, or environmental protection.

Like other social fields, the community field consists of actors, associations, and phases of action. The central feature that distinguishes the community field from other fields is *the generalization of locality-oriented actions across interest lines* (click on Figure 3 below).

Figure 3.

The process of generalization involves actions that are expressed through the interests of a broad range of actors and associations, are clearly located within a locality, involve a substantial proportion of the local population as participants and/or beneficiaries, are conducted by local actors and associations, are aimed toward changing or maintaining the local society, are carried out in an organized or purposive manner, and have coordination among interest fields as a major objective. Such actions contribute to the emergence of the community field in local settlements.

Generalization gives structure to the whole of community as an interactional field by linking and organizing the common interests of the various social fields. By comprising all the actions which contribute to the whole, the community field interlinks and coordinates the various social fields and harnesses their information, experience, resources, and energy for the common good.

In brief, community is not a given. Instead, community emerges in a local society and persists as long as the local citizens ensure its survival. It follows, then, that community is a variable; it is a matter of degree. Community varies across local societies and within the same local society over time. The community, defined as a generalizing, locality-oriented social field, is in a constant state of change as actors and associations, each with their respective actions, move into and out of contact with the process.

Community Development

From an interactional point of view, community development can be defined as a process of building and strengthening the social and economic viability of the community field. As a process, community development involves purposive, positive, and structure-oriented actions, and exists in the efforts, as well as in the achievements, of people working together to address their common interests in the local society.

Four principles underlie the process of community development. They include:

- (1) Community development is *purposive*.
It is the intentional consequence of people interacting to initiate and maintain community.
- (2) Community development is *positive*.
The purposive intentions of the actors revolve around a shared commitment to improving their community.
- (3) Community development is *structure oriented*.
The purposive and positive actions of actors are direct attempts to establish and/or strengthen the community as an interlinking and coordinating structure of human relationships.
- (4) Community development exists in the *efforts* of people and not necessarily in goal achievement.
Simply stated, community development is purposive action undertaken with positive intentions at improving community structure.

In short, the essence of community development lies in the doing - the working together toward a common goal - not in the outcome. Trying to purposively alter the community-field structure in a positive manner is enough to qualify as community development. From this point of view, community development refers to the creation and maintenance of *community*, per se, as a social characteristic of a local population.

It is through the community field that comprehensive community development efforts are coordinated and executed. In this context, two important ideas must be addressed in order to understand how communities change and develop. First, we must be able to distinguish between the two types of development commonly referred to as *development in community* and *development of community*. Second, we must be able to differentiate between the two broad spheres of community activity generally known as *task accomplishment* and *structure building*.

Development “in” Community and Development “of” Community

Development “in” Community

Development in community primarily refers to an approach to bring about improvements in the community. Examples include economic growth, modernization, and improved service development. With this type of development the community tends to be viewed merely as a setting or location where various developments occur.

Development “of” Community

Development of community is a much broader process than economic development and other developments in the community. Development of community involves purposive efforts by people in a locality to articulate and maintain community as a collective experience among themselves.

Task Accomplishment and Structure Building

Task accomplishment refers to activities that move people toward specific goals, which are generally related to a particular project in a specific social field. Structure building refers to activities that establish and maintain community relationships. Both spheres of activity are typically marked by five stages: (1) initiation; (2) organization of sponsorship; (3) goal setting and strategy formation; (4) recruitment; and (5) implementation.

Task Accomplishment

- (1) *Initiation* – involves identifying an issue as a potential focus for group action.
- (2) *Organization of sponsorship* – involves identifying an existing structure (i.e., a committee, group, organization) or establishing a new one to deal with the issue.

- (3) *Goal setting and strategy formation* – involves the setting of goals and the development of a plan to reach those goals.
- (4) *Recruitment* – involves mobilizing resources, such as participants, facilities, finances, and organizational legitimacy.
- (5) *Implementation* – involves applying resources and employing strategies to deal with the issue.

Structure Building

- (1) *Initiation* – involves generating widespread consciousness of linkages among various social fields.
- (2) *Organization of sponsorship* – involves attempts to coordinate and integrate actions within and across various fields through the formation of multi-interest networks and inter-organizational linkages.
- (3) *Goal setting and strategy formation* – involves developing long-range goals and strategies that transcend the special interests of particular social fields.
- (4) *Recruitment* – involves building cohesion, coordinating actions, developing new leaders and leadership skills, and encouraging participation in community planning and development.
- (5) *Implementation* – involves building and maintaining the structure of the community field.

In the practice of community development, the stages for both task accomplishment and structure building activities are rarely well sequenced. Task accomplishment and structure building activities can begin at any stage, frequently backtracking and leaping ahead.

In brief, both forms of development and both spheres of activity can affect the well-being of a local population. However, it is important to recognize that development in community without development of community and task accomplishment without structure building is likely to produce, at best, transitory results in your community.