

Community and Community Development in Resource-Based Areas: Operational Definitions Rooted in an Interactional Perspective

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An understanding of community development in resource-based areas must begin with an awareness of what a community is and how it develops. In this article I provide a conceptual foundation for operational definitions of community and community development. The proposed working definitions are grounded in sociological theory and empirical research. This endeavor is timely since so much of our social, economic, and political rhetoric makes reference to these two concepts yet fails to provide adequate interpretations for the terms.

Keywords community, community development, fields, interactional theory, local society

Chapter 22 of *Society and Natural Resources: A Summary of Knowledge* is a review of some of the more critical issues related to the use of community in natural resource management.¹ In that chapter, which is aptly titled “The Use of Community in Natural Resource Management,” my colleagues and I provided an overview of the uses of the term *community* (Luloff et al. 2004). We then differentiated community as the “level of analysis” from the more vernacular “unit of analysis” and “studies in community” from “studies of community.” Lastly, we examined the use of the concept in the context of several key content domains and also identified the implications of the patterns and trends observed in the literature for future community-related work in natural resources.

Our review led us to conclude that while previous work has contributed to a greater understanding of the connections between ecological conditions and community well-being, there is much about these linkages that remains both unexplained and unexplored. My associates and I believe that a considerable need exists for additional theoretically and empirically robust community–natural resource interface research. Included among the topical areas that warrant increased attention in resource-dependent settlements are basic, fundamental issues involving the concepts of community and community development.

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Community development is a very appealing idea. Time and again, 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 a 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, especially in rural resource-dependent areas, researchers, community developers, natural resource managers, and agency 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 article I articulate and apply principles from an interactional theoretical perspective of social organization, which is rooted in the writings of Harold Kaufman (1959) and Kenneth Wilkinson (1991), to definitional issues surrounding the notions of community and community development. My objective is twofold. First, throughout this essay, I offer a brief and unambiguous explication of the key concepts and ideas inherent to the interactional approach advocated by Kaufman and Wilkinson, and further elaborated on by their students and colleagues. In doing so, I provide a conceptual foundation grounded in sociological theory and empirical research for operational definitions of community and community development. This is a timely task since so much of our social, economic, and political rhetoric makes reference to “community” and “community development” yet fails to provide adequate explanations for the terms. Second, I hope this essay stimulates and contributes to discussions between/among academicians, policymakers, and/or practitioners (i.e., natural resources managers, agency personnel, stakeholders, etc.) who work either directly or indirectly in community development at the community-natural resource interface. I next elaborate proposed working definitions of *community* and *community development*.

Community

Community is an extremely elusive construct. People use the term *community* in a variety of ways. Two of the more common uses of the term refer to those communities known as “territory-free” and those labeled “territory-based.” The term “territory-free community” generally is used to describe types of social groupings or networks. Examples include social groupings or networks such as “the business community,” “the farm community,” “the Hispanic community,” “the academic community,” “the prison community,” “the Baptist community,” and “the Internet community.”

The other common use of the term, and the one of interest in this article, refers to geographically localized settlements or “territory-based communities.” So, what constitutes a territory-based community? While there is not a universally accepted definition, most sociological definitions of such communities emphasize one or more of the following components: shared territory, common life, collective actions, and mutual identity.

Our first task, then, is to provide a working definition of community. For purposes of this essay, *community* is defined as *a place-oriented process of interrelated actions through which members of a local population express a shared sense of identity*

while engaging in the common concerns of life. This definition, which is grounded in interactional theory (Kaufman 1959; Wilkinson 1991), views social interaction as the substantive element of community. Social interaction is the thread that ties together the four ingredients of community. Social interaction (a) delineates an area as shared territory, (b) contributes to the wholeness of local life, (c) gives structure and direction to collective actions, and (d) is the source of mutual identity.

From this perspective, community occurs in places and is place oriented, but the place itself, *per se*, is not the community. The place serves as the setting in which social interaction occurs. So, where can we find “community”? Our search for community begins with the “local society.”

Local Society

Community, as conceptualized here, is a phenomenon that occurs in a “local society.” For purposes of this essay, a *local society* is defined as *the area in which a population meets its daily needs and encounters shared problems*. At a minimum, there are three features inherent to any local society: (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 (i.e., places such as villages, hamlets, townships, boroughs, towns, and cities) contained therein; a demographic profile; a social class structure; social, economic, and political institutions; and natural resource endowments.

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 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. Local societies generally vary with respect to the quantity and quality of their respective social and economic institutions. And local societies tend to differ with regard to environmental and natural resource-related issues and conditions. Variability in the amounts of forestland, rangeland, and mineral, energy, and water resources, as well as resource dependency, utilization, extraction, and management activities, can be found within and across local societies.

Social Fields

Local societies are marked by the presence of several more or less distinct “social fields.” As suggested by Kaufman (1959) and Wilkinson (1991), a social field is an unfolding, loosely bounded, constantly changing, interconnected process of social interaction displaying unity through time around an identifiable set of interests. 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 refer to the projects, programs, activities, and/or events in which actors and associations are

engaged. Associations refer to formal organizations and informal groups. Actors refer to the 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 to a greater or lesser extent 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, economy, and recreation (see Figure 1).

Community Field

Where social fields in various interest areas converge or overlap, the potential to form a *community field* exists. As noted by Kaufman (1959) and Wilkinson (1991), the community field is a locality-oriented social field that is related to, yet distinguished from, other activity fields in a local population. 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

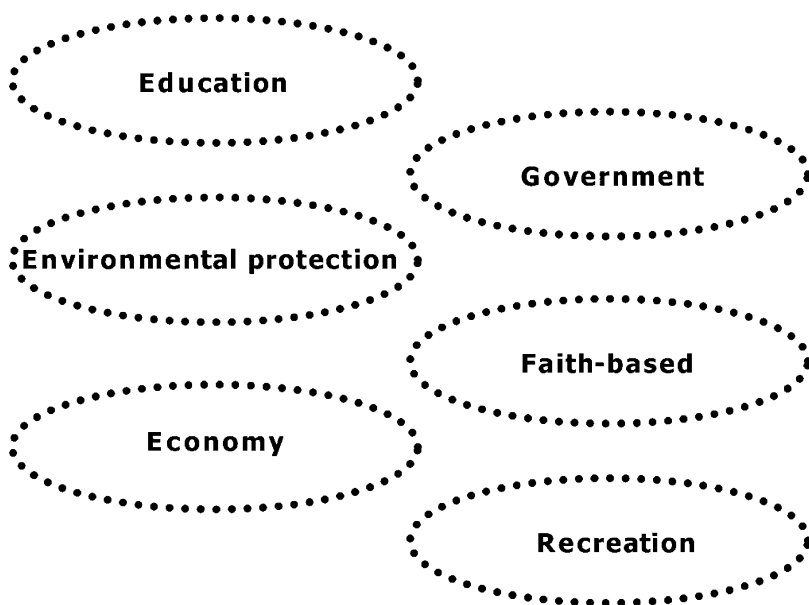


Figure 1. Common social fields found in localities.

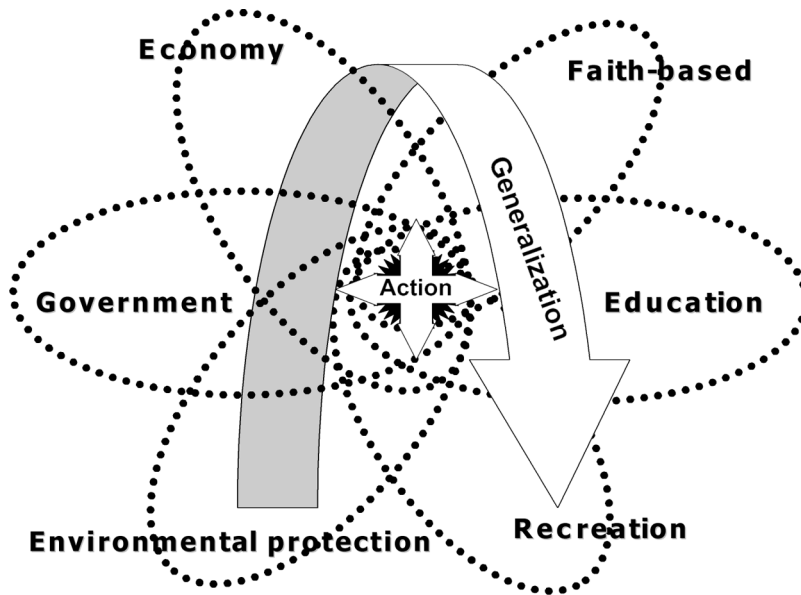


Figure 2. An example of a community field.

other fields is *the generalization of locality-oriented actions across interest lines* (see Figure 2).

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 locality, are carried out in an organized or purposive manner, and have coordination among fields of interest 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 that 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.

Community Development

As with the term *community*, various definitions have been prescribed for the concept of *community development* (see Christenson and Robinson 1989). In this paper, the approach to defining community development is driven by interactional theory (Kaufman 1959; Wilkinson 1991). Here, *community development* is defined as *a process of building and strengthening the community*. Accordingly, community development refers to the creation and maintenance of *community* as a social characteristic of a local population. From an interactional perspective, community development can be viewed “as a process of developing the community field” (Wilkinson 1991, 87).

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 shared interests and solve their common problems. Such principles, from an interactional perspective (Wilkinson 1991, 93–94), underlie the process of community development. To reiterate:

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 necessarily in the outcome. Trying to purposively alter the structure of the community in a positive manner is enough to qualify as community development (Wilkinson 1991).

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 two types of development commonly referred to as “development in community” and “development of community” (Summers 1986; Wilkinson 1991). Second, we must be able to differentiate between the two broad spheres of community activity generally known as “task accomplishment” and “structure building” (Wilkinson 1991).

Development in Community

Development in community primarily refers to an approach to bring about improvements, primarily infrastructural enhancements, in the community. Examples include economic growth, modernization, improved service delivery, and business retention, expansion, and recruitment. With this type of development, the community tends to be viewed merely as a setting or location in which various improvements occur.

Development of Community

Development of community is a much broader process than economic development, modernization, improved service delivery, and other developments in the community. This type of development consists of establishing, fostering, and maintaining processes in the community that encourage communication and cooperation between/among individuals, informal groups, and formal organizations. Development of community

involves purposive, positive, structure-oriented efforts by people in a locality to articulate and sustain a community field.

Task Accomplishment

Task accomplishment refers to activities that move people toward specific goals, which are generally related to a particular project in a specific field of interest.

Structure Building

Structure building refers to activities that establish and maintain community-level relationships. The most distinctive feature of such activities is the focus on developing and/or enhancing channels of cooperation and communication across interest groups. Individuals, informal groups, and formal organizations consciously work to increase the number or reinforce the strength of relationships among the various social fields, while reducing and/or circumventing the barriers to cooperation and communication.

Summary

As noted in Chapter 22 of *Society and Natural Resources: A Summary of Knowledge*, the term *community* has been used in a variety of manners and purposes in the environmental and natural resources literature (Luloff et al. 2004). Such variations in theoretical orientations and use have led to a rich, but complex and seemingly cloudy knowledge base addressing the community-natural resource interface and linkages.

Community, as conceptualized in this essay, 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 place-oriented process of interrelated actions through which local residents express a shared sense of identity while engaging in the common concerns of life—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.

As with community, community development is not a given either. It takes purposive, positive, structure-oriented efforts for a community to “develop.” The process of community development depends in large part on the intentional actions of people working together to try to improve their community. From this perspective, *the action itself is the development*; or, stated in another way, *the development is the action*.

Both forms of development—development in community and development of community—and both spheres of activity—task accomplishment and structure building—affect the well-being of a local population. With that said, it is important for researchers, community developers, natural resource managers, and agency personnel to recognize that development in community without development of community and task accomplishment without structure building are likely to produce, at best, transitory results in a community. In many rural resource-based localities, pressing needs exist for job creation, increased incomes, economic growth, modernization, improved service delivery, business retention, expansion, and recruitment, and other developments in community. However, solely focusing on such

developments and engaging merely in task accomplishment activities ignores the essential contribution that development of community and structure-building activities make to local social, economic, and ecological well-being.

Concluding Comments

My purpose in this article was to articulate and apply principles from an interactional theoretical perspective of social organization (Kaufman 1959; Wilkinson 1991) to definitional issues surrounding the notions of community and community development. By no means was it my objective to assert that community and community development should be viewed from only one perspective. Instead, my goal in this essay was to use interactional theory to lay the groundwork and provide a conceptual foundation for operational definitions of community and community development in resource-based areas. While other perspectives (e.g., human ecology; social systems) do, in fact, exist and may be considered justifiably worthy, I believe that an interactional approach to community and community development has much to offer as we continue applying these concepts to the study of community-natural resource conditions and to the increasingly popular practice of community-based natural resource management.

As indicated, the interactional approach takes a nondeterministic view of reality; it focuses on the dynamics of the emergent and variable aspects of social life. The interactional perspective can provide a theoretical foundation as researchers empirically attempt to account for, document, and predict the breadth of factors associated with community and ecological well-being in resource-based areas. For example, the field-theoretical approach offers a framework for examining the social conditions that contribute to variability in resource availability, utilization, and dependency, as well as environmental policies and natural resource management actions (e.g., soil conservation behaviors, watershed management programs, sustainable farming practices, etc.). Research on the community-level impacts of growth and development associated with tourism and recreational use in resource- and amenity-based areas can also be framed within the interactional perspective. At the practitioner level, development programs rooted in the assumptions, propositions, and concepts of interactional field theory have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of resource management policies and practices at a community level (e.g., community-based forestry, community-based fisheries management, community-based wildlife management, etc.).

Last, as research and practice have demonstrated, community development does not always occur harmoniously. Embedded in the process of community development are numerous social, economic, political, and environmental issues that can, and frequently do, become manifest and negatively impact success. Natural resource managers and agency personnel must be cognizant that more often than not community development involves conflict, confrontation, negotiation among competing interests, marginalization, disfranchisement, and/or challenges for leadership.

Note

1. *Society and Natural Resources: A Summary of Knowledge* (Manfredo et al. 2004) was published in part to commemorate the 10th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management in Keystone, CO.

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