

## Community, Place, and Decision-Making

Gene L. Theodori  
Department of Sociology  
Sam Houston State University  
Box 2446  
Huntsville, TX 77341-2446  
[gtheodori@shsu.edu](mailto:gtheodori@shsu.edu)

Gerard T. Kyle  
Department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences  
Texas A&M University  
2261 TAMU  
College Station, TX 77843-2261  
[gerard@tamu.edu](mailto:gerard@tamu.edu)

### ABSTRACT

The term community is commonly invoked in the literatures on “place” and “natural resource decision-making.” Upon careful examination of the place and decision-making research, though, it becomes increasingly evident that no shared theoretical foundation or common use of the word *community* exists. Such variations in conceptual orientations and use have led to a somewhat complex and cloudy knowledge base with respect to “community-place-and-decision-making” linkages. In this chapter, we articulate and apply principles from an interactional theoretical perspective of social organization, rooted in the writings of Harold Kaufman (1959; 1985) and Kenneth Wilkinson (1970; 1991) – and further elaborated upon by their colleagues and students – to the notions of community, place, and decision-making.

We begin our discussion with the concept of place. Our point of departure is that place is *a necessary but not sufficient condition* for community. Place, as we show, has conventionally been an essential component in the study of community. As numerous authors have noted (e.g., Day 2006; Wilkinson 1991), place is where the search for community begins. Wilkinson (1991: 23), for example, asserted that “[t]he local territory ... is a logical place to begin the search for community, even if the study takes one beyond the locality as well.” Day (2006: 32) articulated that in community research “[p]laces are singled out for study because they appear to constitute viable communities, and once they are investigated and documented, the findings are read as showing precisely what a real community is like.”

After informing the reader that we are restricting the domain of our work to “place-based communities,” we then pose the question “what makes a place a community?” Before attempting to answer that question, we review key elements inherent in the notions of place and community. Building upon Gieryn (2000), we state that, at a minimum, place has three essential features. These include: (1) geographic location; (2) material form; and, (3) investment with meaning and value. Then, rooting to Kaufman (1959, 1985) and Wilkinson (1970, 1991), we assert that there are three elements inherent in community. These include: (1) locality; (2) local

society; and, (3) locality-oriented social interactions. We elaborate on each of these place and community features.

Continuing with the “what makes a place a community” idea, we then introduce and define the notions of a social field and a community field. Both types of fields are fundamental constructs in interactional theory. As suggested by Kaufman (1959, 1985) and Wilkinson (1970, 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.

We explain that in any given locality there are multiple social fields, some of which are more locality-oriented than others. We note that 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 are provided. Included here are those pursuing interests in education, local government, environmental protection, faith-based services, economy, and recreation.

We then explain how the potential to form a “community field” exists when social fields in various interest areas converge or overlap. Following Kaufman (1959, 1985) and Wilkinson (1970, 1991), we assert that the community field is a locality-oriented social field that is related to, yet distinguished from, other activity fields in a local population. Like other social fields, the community field consists of actors, associations, and phases of action. However, unlike most social fields in a locality which tend to engage in special interests, the community field pursues the interests of the general community. We avow that the central feature that distinguishes the community field from other fields is *the generalization of locality-oriented actions across interest lines*. 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.

We conclude this section on “what makes a place a community” by noting that community, viewed here as a generalizing social field, is not a given. A community, as we define it, emerges in a locality and persists as long as the local citizens ensure its survival.

Our attention then turns to the notion of decision-making. Decision-making refers to the process of making a decision. A decision can be defined as the act of making up one’s mind. It has a “task orientation.” A process can be defined as a continuous behavior, action, or procedure. It has a “structure orientation.” Here, we are particularly concerned with natural resource-related decision-making in the context of place-based communities. As a point of departure in this

section we begin with a quote from Bob Lee and Don Field. In the chapter on “Community Complexity: Postmodern Challenges to Forests and Natural Resource Management” in their edited book titled *Communities and Forests: Where People Meet the Land*, Lee and Field (2005: 291) stated:

... today, policies are legitimated by chartering scientific studies and policy and management decisions by developing ‘science-based plans.’ Communities, especially territorial communities, are the recipients of ‘rational’ decisions made by experts – what we today often refer to as the many ‘ologists’: biologists, ecologists, sociologists, ornithologists, etc. Professional decision makers may solicit community ‘input,’ and make decisions in the interests of interested publics, including communities. Community participation is often avoided because it is replete with the sorts of ‘messiness’ that was to be supplanted by rationality and science-based decisions.

Our attention then turns to the contemporary natural resource management decision-making concepts, such as “community-based resource management,” “community-based collaboration and co-management,” and “public participation in resource management decision-making.” We question the degree to which these approaches are explicitly connected to a theory of community organization. What do these approaches truly say about the community as an important unit of social organization ... and the way the community affects the emergence, maintenance, and transformation of natural resource decision-making? What do these approaches say about those individuals who see the place (and the natural resources located therein) for its use value, its exchange value, or its combination of both?

Good theory, as we proclaim, leads to good application. Our overall intent in this chapter is to explain how an understanding of the assumptions, propositions, and concepts of interactional field theory have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of natural resource decision-making at a community level. We then propose and illustrate a model of place-based community decision-making rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of the interactional field perspective. The model is an adaptation of Theodori’s (2007) recent guidebook to community-based planning, written primarily for county Extension faculty. The proposed model, which is grounded in community theory and empirical research, includes five common phases involved in the process of community action, as well as an important sixth stage.

The six phases include: (1) initiation, (2) organization of sponsorship, (3) visioning, goal setting, and strategy formation, (4) recruitment, (5) implementation, and (6) evaluation. Initiation involves generating widespread consciousness of an issue among various fields of interest in a community. Organization of sponsorship involves the formation of multi-interest networks and inter-organizational linkages to coordinate and integrate actions within and across the various social fields. Visioning, goal setting, and strategy formation involves developing a vision, short-term and long-range goals, and strategies that transcend the special interests of particular social fields. Recruitment involves encouraging participation, building cohesion, developing new leaders and leadership skills, and coordinating actions. Implementation involves applying resources and employing strategies to build, strengthen, and maintain the structure of the community field. And, evaluation involves identifying and celebrating specific outputs and outcomes of the process.

We conclude the chapter by explaining why an interactional theoretical perspective of social organization has much to offer to the study of place and natural resource management decision-making.

## References

- Day, G. 2006. *Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Gieryn, T.E. 2000. A space for place in sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 463-496.
- Kaufman, H.F. 1959. Toward an interactional conception of community. *Social Forces* 38: 8-17.
- Kaufman, H.F. 1985. An action approach to community development. Pp. 53-65 in *Focus on Community*, F.A. Fear & H.S. Schwarzeller (eds.). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Lee, R.G. and D.R. Field. 2005. Community complexity: Postmodern challenges to forests and natural resource management. Pp. 291-303 in *Communities and Forests: Where People Meet the Land*, R.G. Lee and D.R. Field (eds.). Corvallis: Oregon State University Press.
- Theodori, Gene L. 2007. *Preparing for the Future: A Guide to Community-Based Planning*. Starkville, MS: Southern Rural Development Center.  
[Available online at [http://srcd.msstate.edu/publications/cbp\\_theodori.pdf](http://srcd.msstate.edu/publications/cbp_theodori.pdf)]
- Wilkinson, K.P. 1970. The community as a social field. *Social Forces* 48: 311-322.
- Wilkinson, K.P. 1991. *The Community in Rural America*. New York: Greenwood Press.