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Courtney G. Flint
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

A. E. Luloff
The Pennsylvania State University

Gene L. Theodori
Sam Houston State University

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EXTENDING THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY INTERACTION TO EXPLORE REGIONAL COMMUNITY FIELDS

COURTNEY G. FLINT

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

A.E. LULOFF

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

and

GENE L. THEODORI

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Interactional approaches to community development routinely focus on the *community field* concept at a local level. This paper expands the field concept to a regional level of analysis. It suggests a regional community field emerges through interactions among communities at a regional scale, particularly in rural areas lacking a dominant metropolitan core. Recent contributions by human geographers highlight the emergent characteristics of regions in contrast to the static, bounded regions conceptualized in the past. Such logic is compatible with community field theory. This paper explores the generalizability of the community field concept and assumptions to larger levels of analysis and highlights potential applications for rural development.

Considerable effort has focused on understanding the role of interaction in community development for more than fifty years (Kaufman 1959; Korsching and Allen 2004; Luloff and Bridger 2003; Luloff and Swanson 1995; Wilkinson 1970, 1972, 1991). Interactional approaches to community development center around the *community field*. Use of the term community field directs attention to the processes by which local actions and identities emerge. Such generalizing processes reflect the common interests and concerns of local people and places. Most of those employing the term, generally called interactional or field theorists, center their attention at a community level of analysis. This unit of analysis facilitates understanding of the intersections between individuals and society (Wilkinson 1991) and society and the environment (Field and Burch 1988) and is logical and useful for understanding many local scale processes and factors motivating collective action.

Despite this advantage, there are dangers inherent to views that narrow perceptions of social patterns and processes at one level of organization. Communities do not exist in a bubble; they experience ever-expanding extra-local

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and vertical linkages (Cox 1997; Warren 1978). Ignoring interactions beyond the community carries no impunity. As Eric Swyngedouw stated, “The observation that life is sociospatially constituted does not in itself give or assign priority to a given geographical scale” (1997:144).

Our empirical experiences suggest *the processes associated with the emergence of a community field are the central pillars of community development and are present at other levels of analysis*. In this paper we draw upon this research in evaluating the possibility of extrapolating the community field concept to a broader, regional scale. We focus this exploration around three guiding questions and several talking points to stimulate dialogue about the broader applications of community field theory. The three guiding questions are:

- How generalizable is the logic and theory behind the community field? Can this framework be extrapolated to larger complexes of communities—regions and/or counties for example?
- What are the core linkages between the more common local scale orientation of the community field with a broader spatial view? What are the relationships between these linkages and the three essential aspects of community according to interactional theory—locality, local society, and locality oriented social action processes? And,
- What are the potential applications and limitations of regional field and regional community field concepts?

We begin our analysis with a discussion of why community is not lost, despite globalizing trends and the impacts of mass society. Similarly, we demonstrate why the region, as a meaningful frame for understanding the quest for human and ecological well-being, has not become irrelevant. Next, we indicate how the background assumptions, concepts, and propositions associated with field theory can be applied to a regional level of analysis, especially in rural areas. Finally, we provide empirical support and offer strategies for further empirical exploration of the regional community field.

COMMUNITY IS NOT LOST—NOR IS THE REGION

For much of the twentieth century, most of the community literature bemoaned its decline (Bender 1978). Trends toward mass society, globalization, and a more interconnected world led some to argue the community was becoming less important for social interactions (Giner 1976; Josephson and Josephson 1962; Martindale 1966; Shils 1969; Singer 1973; Vidich and Bensman 1958; Warren

1978). Theories emphasizing a systems approach, particularly those focused on reciprocity as a driving mechanism, highlighted the notion of dying communities (Coleman 1969). Despite its appeal, an argument based almost entirely around an economic rationality, one premised on cold calculations conducted to determine actions, failed to account for the everyday experiences of many people in their home communities. Simply said much of the lost and decline literature rested squarely on a nostalgic reading of community. It is not surprising then that much recent work focused on the community found and liberated—clearly, the community endured.

What sets interactional theory apart from other approaches is the lack of need for reciprocity as an anchor for action. Numerous studies have pointed to the importance of community interaction as a foundation for locality-oriented collective actions in the face of threats and problems and in the name of pursuing a greater sense of well-being at the local scale (Brennan 2007; Flint and Luloff 2005, 2007; Hummon 1990; Kemmis 1990; Korsching and Allen 2004; Luloff and Swanson 1995).

Part of the popularity of the community lost or decline argument, especially when considered given globalizing trends, was its simplicity. Many decline adherents failed to recognize their use of a static, closed-system definition of community (Bender 1978). As a result, they often oversimplify community characteristics. Typically, they viewed communities as homogeneous places (i.e., *Gemeinschaft*) dependent upon strong ties among local residents and/or as social systems with tendencies toward an equilibrium or state of normalcy. Such a framework failed to reflect the dynamic of daily social interaction and the differentiation of localities despite globalizing processes (Sheppard 2002).

Alternatively, adherents of a field theoretical approach to community emphasized social interaction in a changing, emergent way, where people who shared everyday places came together to act in their common interests in a much less bounded sense than one inferred by a systems approach (Wilkinson 1972). Interactional conceptualizations of community facilitated an understanding of why communities endured despite trends enlarging the spaces of everyday life and the social interactions taking place therein. Community is clearly alive in many places—although its level of wellness remains a question.

While interactional processes and conceptual frameworks may be extrapolated to a variety of other smaller and larger scales from neighborhoods to state and global levels of analysis, we focus here on useful connections between community and regional levels of analysis. The conceptualization of *region* has gone through

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a process similar to that of *community*. John Agnew (2000) and Nigel Thrift (1994) described trends in thinking which led to the decline of the region as a critical unit of analysis. By the mid-twentieth century, many interpretations of regions were based on over-simplistic constructions of bounded, homologous spaces (Hartshorne 1959; Semple 1911). Not surprisingly, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the region was seen by many to be “fading away in light of globalization” (Agnew 2000:101). According to Thrift (1994:210): “The pursuit of simplicity had led to the death of the region.” As a result, many researchers abandoned the region as a useful level of analysis (Urry 1985). Others suggested the coherent regional economies previously thought to organize society no longer existed and could be replaced by formulae, since regions were simply seen as repeated practices across the globe (Thrift 1994). Agnew (2000:102) pointed out that for a time, space was seen by many to have “lost its constraining effect due to technological and economic change.”

However, as with community, region – as an important scale of interaction—has been enjoying resurgence (Thrift 1994). Rather than disappearing, Agnew (2000) suggested regional economic and political differences were strengthening. As Thrift (1994:225) noted: “The urge to identify with localities seems to have become stronger.” An interpretation of regions as important spaces of interaction emerged which involved new definitions emphasizing regions dynamic, emergent qualities. This new definition shares many common bases with an interactional definition of community. According to Massey (1984:195), regions “are continually reproduced in shifting form.” In other words, places, including communities and regions, are processes, not outcomes or products (Staeheli 2003). The community field concept, which emphasizes dynamic, emergent processes of interaction, fits nicely with contemporary articulations of regional processes.

FROM THE COMMUNITY FIELD TO A REGIONAL COMMUNITY FIELD

A community field (Kaufman 1959; Wilkinson 1991) is a locality-oriented social field related to, yet distinguished from, other activity fields in a local settlement. A social field can be defined as an unfolding, loosely bound, constantly changing, interconnected process of social interaction displaying unity through time around an identifiable set of interests (Kaufman 1959; Wilkinson 1972, 1991). In terms of process, the social field is characterized by a sequence of *actions* (over time) carried out by *actors* generally working through various *associations*. From an interactional perspective of community, actions refer to projects, programs, activities, and/or events in which actors and associations are engaged. Similarly, associations refer

to formal organizations and informal groups, and actors refer to leaders and other individuals participating in associations and actions.

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

Each social field is generally marked, to a greater or lesser degree, 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. When social fields interact across a broader spatial scale or region, we can refer to the resulting larger field as a *regional field* or *regional social field*. As indicated by Wilkinson (1991), this type of regional field interaction is common, particularly in rural areas and it is also well-appreciated in regional economic development literature (Porter 1996; Saxenian 1994).

Unlike most local social fields that engage special interests, the community field pursues the broader interests of the general community. The community field typically is concerned with community structure rather than specific goals, such as economic development, service enhancement, or environmental protection. On the other hand, 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. According to Kaufman (1959) and Wilkinson (1991) the process of generalization involves several nested characteristics: (1) actions are expressed through the interests of a broad range of actors and associations; (2) they are located within a locality and involve much of the local population as participants and/or beneficiaries; (3) they are conducted by local actors and associations; (4) they focus on efforts to change or maintain the locality and are conducted in an organized, purposive manner; and (5) the coordination among fields of interest is a major objective. When these characteristics come together, they contribute to the emergence of the community field.

We believe the vast majority of principles inherent to the community field are found at or generalizable to other scales, particularly in the emergence of a *regional community field*. A regional community field is a particularly useful construct, both

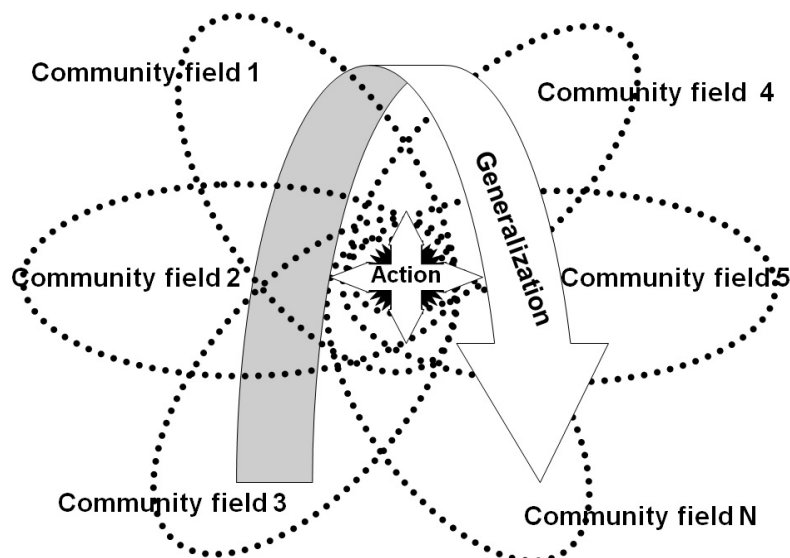
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theoretically and practically. Naturally the regional community field occurs at a higher level of abstraction and represents a different unit and level of analysis. Its interests are in the well-being of a regional community structure rather than specific community configurations. However, in rural areas without a dominant metropolitan core, regional structures can be essential for facilitating development or purposive improvements in local well-being (Korsching, Borich, and Stewart 1992). There may be deficiencies at the community level or broader practical or identity-based reasons leading people to extend their common goals to larger spaces of engagement to pursue shared place-based or locality-based interests. Shared identity at the regional scale can also pull communities together for the general well-being of the greater region.

A central feature of the regional community field, as in the community field, is the process of generalization. At the regional level, generalization of locality-oriented actions occurs *across* community fields, rather than within any single community field (see Figure 1). The process of generalization involves actions: (1) expressed through the interests of two or more community fields; (2) conducted by actors and associations in two or more community fields that are clearly located within a multi-community locality; (3) involve much of the local populations as participants and/or beneficiaries; (4) are conducted in an organized, purposive manner; and (5) are coordinated across multiple community fields. Actions meeting these processes contribute to the emergence of a regional community field.

FIGURE 1. AN EXAMPLE OF A REGIONAL COMMUNITY FIELD.



The process of generalization gives structure to the entire region as an interactional field by linking and organizing the common interests of the various community fields. By comprising all the actions that contribute to the whole, the regional community field interlinks and coordinates the various community fields and harnesses their information, experiences, resources, and energy for the good of the region.¹ By engaging across the regional scale into wider “spaces of engagement” (Cox 1998), communities reach out for new alliances and opportunities for place-oriented action. Various scales may shift in importance over time as new alliances are sought, Sheppard (2002:326) suggested: “Effective alliances cannot simply rely just on scale jumping, but require positional acts identifying specific groups in particular places with whom common ground can be found.”

An interactional approach to community is echoed in the language of new definitions and interpretations of regions. The core elements of community—territory, local society or networks of association, and community field or the process of expressing common interests of the local society—have been extrapolated to larger aggregations of meaningful spaces and places, particularly in the human geography and place literatures. The use of dynamic, fluid interpretations of spaces and territories and the central role social processes play helps us appreciate the connections between interactional definitions of community and of region:

Territories are not frozen frameworks where social life occurs. Rather, they are made, given meanings, and destroyed in social and individual action. Hence, they are typically contested and actively negotiated (Paasi 2003:110).

The role of contestation in regions and broader spaces of interaction resembles the role of conflict theorized within community sociology. Associational action among local actors involves both consensus and conflict (Bates and Bacon 1972; Coleman 1957; Coser 1956; Dahrendorf 1959; Durkheim 1956; Luloff and Swanson 1995). Within communities and regions, there will inevitably be competition as people and places vie for relative advantage (Sheppard 2002). As with community, a regional field may not emerge if interaction and representation across social fields

¹From an interactional perspective, the good of the region or the community is not determined from the analyst’s perspective, but instead from the point of view of community or regional actors.

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is limited. However, interaction, despite tension, is viewed in positive terms within community field theory (Wilkinson 1972, 1991).

According to Robbins (1983:2): “Regions are communities in a broad geographic sense.” He based this connection on a few shared characteristics, including common: (1) cultural and economic orientations; (2) basic physical realities by which people define themselves; and (3) roles of mythologies and sense of place. Regions, like communities, are not static, nor are they prescribed by structural constraints. Regions are not simply the unintended outcomes of economic, social and political processes but are often the deliberate product of actions by those with power in society, who use space and create places in the pursuit of their goals (Johnston 1991:68).

An ability to move beyond the limitations of theorizing communities and regions with fixed boundaries is tied to a shift from systems thinking to a *field interactional* perspective. Conceptualizing communities as social fields rather than social systems allows for constantly changing structures and agency. The field concept allows boundaries to be more fluid and self-interpreted by those interacting. As Johnston (1991) indicates above, regions are the product of deliberate actions. In other words, boundaries differentiating regional fields are continually redefined through the process of interaction and collective action. They may overlap or have gaps between them and change over time. Such a shift from systems thinking de-emphasizes boundary maintenance functions as well as pre-existing relationships that empower extant organizational structures (Wilkinson 1991). It does not, however, dismiss the vital role structure plays in setting the stage for such actions. The more visible structural characteristics of places include things like: (1) the local labor force structure and demographic profile (population size, density, and heterogeneity); (2) economic infrastructure (including transportation facilities, industrial base, and mix of retail and service establishments); (3) physical location (including whether or not it is near or at the rural-urban interface and its proximity to centers of economic expansion); and (4) its natural resource endowments. Perhaps less immediately visible, yet just as critical, are political relationships that structure the distribution of decision-making power and representation. Each of these traits serves as important inputs for assessing community vitality and chances for development and progress. However, while these characteristics set the stage for local actors in associational action, they provide little information and insight into the ability of local/regional residents to influence the directions an area might take.

The application of the interactional field approach to larger scales, such as regions or counties, reflects recognition of the continual reemergence and changing conditions of such places. It is critical to move beyond the current treatment of regions that relies upon either static frameworks focused on equilibrium or simply an aggregation of actions, problems, and conditions of subunits. There is a need to better incorporate the multiplex of emergent concerns across numerous spaces and places into applied theoretical models of local action at such scales. The dynamic nature of the field concept, with its appreciation for the fluidity of boundaries, helps frame a more realistic interpretation of social spaces.

APPLIED REASONS FOR EXPANDING THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY FIELD

Wilkinson highlighted barriers to community interaction, particularly in rural places, noting “deficiencies in resources for meeting needs” and “inadequate social infrastructure of services, associations, and channels for collective action” (1991:9). These barriers to action can be minimized by expanding interaction spaces to a regional scale (Cox 1997). Doing this allows resources to be better distributed and integrated and facilitates a sharing of local social infrastructure across multiple communities and rural spaces. Where individual communities are incomplete social wholes due to rural disadvantages (Wilkinson 1991:24), a regional approach can provide a more comprehensive social whole.

The increasingly important role of local actors in community economic development, particularly in an era marked by devolution, has been demonstrated in a variety of studies. Much of this literature embraces an interactional approach framed around the emergence of community agency, or the capacity for collective action. From an interactional perspective, agency is one of the most important dimensions of a community’s social infrastructure and its use places attention on the key natural resource a place has—namely, its people. Further, the use of the term community agency focuses attention on the coming together of people to address local needs. Their willingness to act collectively comes from recognition of shared needs. It is not associated with romantic visions of societies characterized by strong local solidarity or *gemeinschaft*-like relations. Rather, the collective capacity of volition and choice, however narrowed by structural conditions, makes community agency a central element in local well-being, and in understanding why the community field has relevance for regions and/or counties. People in such places make choices and act on them together. Knowing how these choices are made, what

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and how perceptions of regional issues are constructed, and the ability of members of such regions to access and process information are essential elements in the utilization of economic, social, and natural resource endowments. Likewise, where interaction is limited or structurally or geographically constrained, the regional field concept helps to articulate the consequences of inaction and ways to promote the coordination of common causes across a region.

External ties and linkages are important components of well-being (Granovetter 1973). They increase social interactions and provide access to nontraditional and non-local resources (Wilkinson 1991). Enhancing opportunities for broader interactions across a region is generally good for communities. Such collaborations facilitate the promotion of development across larger spatial areas by coordinating resources and increasing diversity in social interactions. This is especially the case when changing conditions and concerns are broadly experienced—i.e., when they are shared by multiple communities in a common area. Of course, regions can also interact to generalize the effect of interaction at even larger scales.

In the southernmost region of Illinois, representatives from communities and social fields or interest groups from across a twenty-county region have come together in recent years to promote regional scale development and capacity building. ConnectSI, a regional initiative held by Southern Illinois University with many participants including private and nonprofit industry, municipal and county governments, community leaders, and private citizens, has held planning meetings at sub-regional and regional levels since 2006. These meetings spawned initiatives that continue to address crosscutting issues from broadband internet connectivity to energy development to healthcare to economic development broadly defined. Meetings and asset mapping initiatives associated with ConnectSI embody high energy and a clear assertion of regional identity and concern. Community stakeholders from highly disparate and even competing positions come together through this program in the interest of promoting the well-being of Southern Illinois. The ConnectSI mission typifies what we conceptualize as a regional community field:

Connect SI has a vision that focuses on a triple bottom line: economic prosperity, social prosperity, and environmental prosperity. It will truly change the way we live and think in Southern Illinois. Connect SI will not

only help us link our assets to make us work like one region, but it will also help us link our minds to give us one vision for the future (ConnectSI 2009).

A key component to community is the *generalized bond* that emerges when people come together to act because they share spaces and problems (Wilkinson 1991). Community identity is a driving force in promoting local action. Likewise, a shared regional identity can motivate collective action at larger scales with resulting benefits for communities and the region as a whole:

Regional identity has been recognized as a key element in the making of regions as social/political spaces (Paasi 2003:477).

When shared identity catalyzes actions, capacity is refueled for taking on other issues, even those onerous in size or complexity. One example is the collective participation by multiple communities in a region who come together to attract jobs/employment while working to preserve green space and natural resources. In this sense, social fields related to natural resources and the economy interact with those concerned with planning, in each of several localities, to generate more meaningful and broader regional development. Another example is collective action by representatives from multiple communities to motivate political decision making and economic allocation from state and federal agencies when common threats are experienced across a changing landscape. When these events occur, evidence of the regional community field concept is generated.

CONCLUSION

Researchers continue to operationalize concepts related to community, community action, and community field. Interactional capacity is regularly a key factor in mobilizing specific actions for community development (Brennan and Luloff 2007; Flint and Luloff 2007). The same can be said at the regional scale as well. Instead of simply relaxing the territorial component of communities, we can conceptualize a regional field as one extending beyond local boundaries, reflecting the fact people reach out for jobs, resources, interpersonal interaction, and landscape experiences beyond their home locality. A regional field is evident in an expanded spatial scale of interaction within a social field. A regional community field, on the other hand, is evident by interactions among communities across multiple social fields at the regional scale with generalized goals of regional (and

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community) well-being. The key to understanding the regional community field is both exploring the heterogeneity of interactions and the more common tendency to look for commonalities or homogeneity tying people and places together.

Rural sociology as a field of study has long provided a venue for the exploration of community dynamics and bridges between and among theoretical foundations, empirical research, and local development initiatives. Expanding our spatial understanding of community interaction to regional scales opens and encourages opportunities for intra- and transdisciplinary approaches to measuring and promoting interaction among people and places. We suggest applying the field concept at a regional level will help build synergies among sociologists, planners, geographers, anthropologists, economists, community development practitioners, and others interested in rural community and regional well-being.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Courtney G. Flint is Assistant Professor of Rural and Natural Resource Sociology in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research focuses on rural individual, community, and regional responses to ecosystem change and disturbance by examining relationships between risk perception, community interactional capacity, and collective action. Dr. Flint has conducted community-based research in forest, agricultural, coastal, and tundra ecosystems and teaches courses in environment and society as well as field methods in human dimensions of natural resources.

A.E. Luloff is Professor of Rural Sociology and co-chair of the Human Dimensions of Natural Resources and the Environment dual-title, inter-college graduate degree program at Penn State. He teaches, conducts research, and writes about the impacts of rapid social change, as a result of sociodemographic shifts, on the natural and human resource bases of the community. Dr. Luloff is a cofounder and current Executive Director of the International Association for Society and Natural Resources.

Gene L. Theodori is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for Rural Studies: Research & Outreach at Sam Houston State University. He teaches, conducts basic and applied research, and writes professional and popular articles on rural and community development issues, energy and natural resource concerns, and related topics. A central feature of his work is the development of outreach educational and technical assistance programs that address important issues

relating to community and economic development. Dr. Theodori is Past-President of the Southern Rural Sociological Association.

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