

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT, SATISFACTION, AND ACTION

By Gene L. Theodori

ABSTRACT

The effects of community attachment and satisfaction on community-level action were examined using data collected in a general population survey from a random sample of individuals in two rural communities in Texas. Substantial support was found for the hypothesis that attachment to the community is associated positively with community action. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses reveal that higher levels of community attachment result in increased levels of community action. Virtually no support, though, was found for the hypothesis that community satisfaction is negatively associated with community action. The multivariate findings also suggest that certain sociodemographic variables (i.e., education, marital status, race, and length of residence) are important predictors of community action. Possible implications of the findings are advanced, as are suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Community action, community attachment, community development, community satisfaction, measurement

Community action refers to the activities of local residents working together to address and solve specific locale-oriented needs and problems (Wilkinson, 1991). Although it has been asserted that community attachment promotes community action (cf., Beggs, Hurlbert, & Haines, 1996, p. 407), the extent to which community attachment and community satisfaction, a separate yet related concept (Brown, 1993; Brown et al., 2000; Theodori, 2000), affect actions at the community level has not been carefully assessed either theoretically or empirically. Past investigations of the associations of community attachment and satisfaction with community-level actions have been thwarted by methodological inconsistencies or have been based largely on anecdotal evidence rather than systematical evaluation (Beggs et al., 1996; Brown, 1993; Buttell, Martinson, & Wilkening, 1979; Fernandez & Dillman, 1979; Goudy, 1990; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Rojek, Clemente, & Summers, 1975; Stinner et al., 1990; Theodori & Luloff, 2000; Wasserman, 1982). The purpose of this research is to overcome these obstacles. In doing so, this paper adds to the current community development literature on community attachment and satisfaction by examining the effects of the two concepts on community-level action. Before

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describing the data, measurement, and findings, previous studies are summarized, conceptual issues are addressed, and two hypotheses are stated.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Despite the vast literature on community attachment, community satisfaction, and community action, surprisingly little theoretical and/or empirical work has been conducted on the effects of community attachment and/or satisfaction on measures considered to be indicative of community-level action. Most researchers who have incorporated measures of community-level action into their study designs either have used them as surrogates for community attachment and/or satisfaction or have examined the effects of community action on community attachment and/or satisfaction, but not the reverse (Beggs et al., 1996; Brown, 1993; Buttel, Martinson, & Wilkening, 1979; Fernandez & Dillman, 1979; Goudy, 1990; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Rojek, Clemente, & Summers, 1975; Stinner et al., 1990; Theodori & Luloff, 2000; Wasserman, 1982).

Community-Level Action Measures as Dependent Community Attachment and/or Satisfaction Variables

Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), Goudy (1990), Fernandez and Dillman (1979), Stinner et al. (1990), and Beggs et al. (1996) used community-level action variables as their dependent measures of community attachment. In an investigation of 100 local authority areas in England, Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) examined the impact of population size, population density, and three additional independent variables—length of residence, social class, and stage in life-cycle—on ten measures of community attachment. Three of the community attachment items captured local sentiments. The remaining seven attachment items measured local social bonds. One of the seven social bonds items measured the degree of respondents' participation in formal associations within the local community.

Goudy (1990) replicated Kasarda and Janowitz's (1974) research on community attachment with data on respondents from twenty-seven communities in Iowa. Following Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), Goudy (1990) included population size and density, length of residence, age in life-cycle, and income as independent variables. Goudy (1990) measured community attachment with four questions on social bonds and three questions on local sentiments. Like Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), Goudy (1990) included organizational membership as an indicator of social bonds.

Utilizing data collected in two Washington state head-of-household surveys administered in 1970 and 1974, Fernandez and Dillman (1979) examined the effects of community attachment on geographic mobility. Four measures of community attachment were used in their analysis. The authors termed two of the measures "perceptual indicators" and two of them "behavioral indicators."

The behavioral indicators of community attachment included the number of memberships in voluntary associations and time spent in community service activities.

In an analysis of a weighted sub-sample of 415 residents in 91 communities in non-metropolitan Utah, Stinner et al. (1990) examined the relationships of community size, five social position variables, and three dimensions of community attachment. In their investigation, community attachment was measured with four items. These included "community satisfaction," "friendship density," "friendship concentration," and "social participation." The social participation variable was measured by the number of voluntary association memberships of the respondent.

Beggs et al. (1996) used data from telephone interviews conducted with 594 residents in three towns located in two adjacent southwestern Louisiana parishes to estimate the effects of length of residence, four social position variables (i.e., gender, race, education, and income), life cycle stage, and local community context on three dimensions of community attachment – an interpersonal dimension, a sentiments dimension, and a participation dimension. The participation dimension was measured with four domain-specific measures of organizational participation. Respondents were asked whether or not they were members of school groups, church groups, community groups, and/or interest groups.

Community-Level Action Measures as Independent Variables

Other researchers (e.g., Brown, 1993; Buttel et al., 1979; Rojek et al., 1975; Theodori & Luloff, 2000; Wasserman, 1982) used measures of community-level action as either independent or control variables in their community attachment and/or satisfaction studies. Using data collected on 1,166 heads of households in four counties in north central Illinois, Rojek et al. (1975) factor analyzed satisfaction with fifteen local services. Four service dimensions emerged. These included: medical services (satisfaction with hospital-medical facilities, medical doctors, and dentists); public services (satisfaction with streets/roads, water supply, fire and police protection); educational services (satisfaction with elementary school, high school, neighborliness, and churches); and commercial services (satisfaction with shopping facilities, recreational facilities, job opportunities, and educational services for the physically and mentally handicapped). They then correlated eleven economic, social, and demographic variables with each dimension of community satisfaction. The total number of organizational affiliations was one of the eleven independent variables examined.

Buttel et al. (1979) analyzed the issue of size of place and community attachment using data collected on 548 Wisconsin adults. They related eight independent variables to their two measures of community attachment. Included among the eight independent variables was a measure of organizational membership. Three years later in a reexamination of the Buttel et al. (1979)

study, Wasserman (1982) used national survey data to examine the relation of size of place and nine additional independent variables to community attachment and satisfaction. As in the Buttell et al. (1979) study, organizational membership was included as one of the ten independent variables.

Brown (1993) used data from 311 individuals in two rural Missouri communities to examine issues surrounding community satisfaction and attachment in mass society. Like Rojek et al. (1975), Buttell et al. (1979), and Wasserman (1982), Brown (1993) also used organizational membership as an independent variable. More recently, Theodori and Luloff (2000) addressed the question of community attachment using data gathered from 1,491 individuals in four Pennsylvania agricultural communities exhibiting varying levels of urbanization. Two measures of community-level action were included as independent variables in their analysis. First, a question was asked concerning the number of hours, on average, ordinarily spent in a normal month attending or taking part in any kind of organized or planned group activity or event (not associated with work) that involved other members of the community. A second item measured whether or not the individual, along with others, participated in a community improvement activity, such as a cooperative building project or a fund-raising effort.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND HYPOTHESES

One reason why the associations of community attachment and satisfaction to community-level issues, such as community action, remains underinvestigated may reflect the lack of a theoretical perspective. For example, in a study of the relationships among community attachment, community involvement, and types of communication, Rothenbuhler et al. (1996) developed a structural equation model linking community attachment and involvement to newspaper use, local television news use, age, education, number of children in the home, localism, and population density. In the development of their model, Rothenbuhler et al. (1996) suggested that an important conceptual relationship between community attachment and involvement exists; however, they did not specify a path between the two concepts. According to the authors, "... there is no theory or evidence on which to base a causal order between these variables" (Rothenbuhler et al., 1996, p. 451).

Despite the lack of a formal theoretical perspective, the extant literature does offer guidance about the likely causal connections of community attachment and community satisfaction to action at the community level. In a survey of black residents in Harlem, Saegert (1989) uncovered a positive association between place attachment and efforts to maintain and improve the quality of life in residential buildings and the neighborhood at large. In Saegert's (1989, p. 312) view, "Attachment to place anchors people in their buildings and neighborhood and shores up commitment to working cooperatively for a supportive environment." Earlier, Florin and Wandersman

(1984) reported a negative association between satisfaction and participation in a block-level organization in their study of 421 adult residents in Nashville, Tennessee. While they never formally stated a hypothesis, Florin and Wandersman (1984) assumed that an individual's satisfaction with the block, or "encoded view" as they referred to it, might influence his or her probability of participation. Their assumption was that individuals with greater levels of satisfaction would be less likely to participate in a community development project. Their measures included satisfaction with the block as a whole and satisfaction with specific aspects of the block, such as housing conditions, street conditions, safety, and quietness.

Drawing upon Saegert's (1989) place-level analysis and Florin and Wandersman's (1984) block-level research, the following two hypotheses were tested. First, it was hypothesized that attachment to the community is positively associated with action at the community level. The second hypothesis was that community satisfaction is negatively associated with community action. The underlying theoretical assumptions in this paper are similar to those of Florin and Wandersman (1984) and Saegert (1989). Higher levels of attachment to the community are expected to lead to higher levels of community action, while higher levels of community satisfaction are expected to lead to lower levels of action at the community level.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected in a general population survey from a random sample of individuals in two communities located in west Texas. The communities selected for in-depth study included Stanton (located in Martin County) and Sanderson (located in Terrell County).¹ In May of 2001, interviews were conducted with eight key informants in each study site to help identify timely and salient local social, economic, and environmental issues. The data gathered in the key informant interviews assisted in the development of a household questionnaire that not only asked specific questions about local issues but also inquired into a variety of topics including community attachment, community satisfaction, and community involvement.

Following a modified total design method (Dillman, 1978), questionnaire data were gathered using mail survey techniques. During the spring of 2002, the survey questionnaire was mailed to a randomly selected sample of 498 households in Stanton and to all 423 residential addresses on file with the United States Post Office located in Sanderson.² To obtain a representative sample of individuals within households, a response from the adult with the most recent birthday was requested. The survey instrument, organized as a self-completion booklet, contained 38 questions and required approximately 40 minutes to complete. After the initial survey mail out, a postcard reminder, and two follow-up survey mailings, a 46 percent response rate was achieved. Overall, this resulted in 428 completed questionnaires between the two sites.³

MEASUREMENT

Community Action

Following a field theoretical perspective on social organization (Kaufman, 1985; Wilkinson, 1970, 1991), it is proposed that social interaction is the essential feature of the community. Distinguishing between individual-level and community-level social interactions within local populations is thus a critical issue. Individual-level social interactions include, for example, activities such as visiting or meeting with family, close friends, and neighbors within the community. Conversely, community-level interactions include activities such as participating in a community improvement project or working with other members of the community to try to solve local problems. While individuals live and interact in localities, the aggregation of all interactions that take place in a given locality does not constitute community interaction (Wilkinson, 1989). Unlike individual-level interactions, community-level interaction "relates to shared territory, contributes to the wholeness of local social life, and seeks to improve the well-being of the local society as a whole" (Wilkinson 1989, p. 339).

In this paper, community action was assessed using three individual questions. Respondents were asked whether or not they had ever (a) attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in their community; (b) worked with others in their community to try to solve community problems; and (c) participated in any type of community improvement activity. Each community-level action was dummy coded (1 = yes; 0 = no).

Community Attachment and Satisfaction

Community attachment and satisfaction were the independent variables of primary interest in this paper. Community attachment was assessed with both a multiple-item index and a single measure of attachment. Respondents were asked to respond to the following eleven statements: (a) overall, I am very attached to this community; (b) I feel like I belong in this community; (c) the friendships and associations that I have with other people in this community mean a lot to me; (d) if the people in this community were planning something, I'd think of it as something WE were doing rather than THEY were doing; (e) if I needed advice about something, I could go to someone in this community; (f) I think I agree with most people in this community about what is important in life; (g) given the opportunity, I would move out of this community; (h) I feel loyal to the people in this community; (i) I plan to remain a resident of this community for a number of years; (j) I like to think of myself as similar to the people who live in this community; and (k) the future success of this community is very important to me. Response categories included (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) disagree, and (4) strongly disagree. After reverse coding of items "a"

through "f" and items "h" through "k," a composite community attachment score was calculated by averaging the responses for the individual items. High scores reflected high levels of community attachment; low scores indicated low levels. A principal-axis factor analysis with oblique rotation revealed that these measures of community attachment were unidimensional and explained 55 percent of the variance. Cronbach's alpha for this attachment scale was 0.93. A single-item measure asked "How interested are you in knowing what goes on in your community?" For purposes of this paper, responses were dichotomized as 0 (very disinterested, somewhat disinterested, neither interested nor disinterested, and somewhat interested) and 1 (very interested).

Community satisfaction was assessed with both a multi-item domain-specific satisfaction scale and a single measure of general satisfaction. Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the following seven items: (a) medical and health care services; (b) opportunity to earn an adequate income; (c) senior citizen's programs; (d) youth programs; (e) local shopping facilities; (f) recreation facilities and programs; and (g) overall physical appearance of the community. Responses ranged from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied). A composite domain-specific satisfaction score was calculated by averaging the responses for the seven items. High scores reflected high levels of domain satisfaction; low scores indicated low levels. A principal-axis factor analysis with oblique rotation revealed that these measures of community satisfaction were unidimensional and explained 43 percent of the variance. Cronbach's alpha for this satisfaction scale was 0.83. In a general measure, respondents were asked to indicate how satisfied, overall, they were with life in their community. Responses were dichotomized as 0 (very dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and somewhat satisfied) and 1 (very satisfied).

Sociodemographic Variables

Five sociodemographic factors – education, income, marital status, race, and length of residence in the community – were included as control variables.⁴ Length of residence was measured in years. Education was coded as follows: (1) less than high school; (2) high school equivalent; (3) some college; (4) college degree; and (5) training beyond college. Income was measured by 10 categories ranging from (1) less than \$9,999 to (10) more than \$90,000. Race (1 = white; 0 = other) and marital status (1 = married; 0 = other) were each dummy coded.

Community of Residence

Community of residence was also included as a control variable to examine whether differences existed between the two sites, which manifested opposite patterns of recent population growth and decline, with respect to levels of community action. The measure was dummy coded to indicate in which site the respondent lived (1 = Stanton; 0 = Sanderson).

FINDINGS

The relationships of community attachment and satisfaction to community action were assessed using bivariate and multivariate logistic regression techniques. Bivariate and net odds ratios for the community attachment, community satisfaction, sociodemographic, and community of residence variables are reported in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Bivariate Results

At the bivariate level, considerable support was found for the proposition that attachment to the community is associated with action at the community level. As shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3, the bivariate relationships between the two community attachment variables and each measure of community action were positive and statistically significant. This indicated that individuals with higher levels of attachment to their community were more likely than those with lower levels to have attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in their community, worked with others in the community to try to solve community problems, and participated in a community improvement activity. Very little support, though, was found for the proposition that community satisfaction is associated with community-level actions. Only one of the six odds ratios

Table 1. Logistic Regression of "Having Ever Attended a Public Meeting on Town or School Affairs in the Community" on Community Attachment, Community Satisfaction, and the Control Variables^a

Variables	Odds ratios	
	Bivariate	Multivariate
Community attachment		
Multi-item attachment scale	1.91**	2.40**
Interest in community (1 = very interested)	2.81***	2.42**
Community satisfaction		
Satisfaction with domains	1.09	0.85
Overall satisfaction (1 = very satisfied)	1.15	0.58
Sociodemographic variables		
Education	1.48**	1.56**
Income	1.12*	1.00
Marital status (1 = married)	2.33**	2.23*
Race (1 = white)	1.77*	1.69
Length of residence	1.00	1.01
Community of residence		
Community (1 = Stanton)	0.70	0.76
-2 log-likelihood		297.36
Model Chi Square		50.04***

^aN = 293.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

from the bivariate regressions of community action on the satisfaction variables attained statistical significance (and only at the 0.05 level of significance). Individuals who scored high on the domain-specific satisfaction scale were significantly more likely than those who scored low to have participated in a community improvement activity (Table 3).

Of the control variables, community and length of residence consistently failed to reach statistical significance. Married individuals were more likely than those who were not married to have attended a public meeting on town or school affairs and participated in a community improvement activity. White respondents and those with higher levels of education and income were more likely than their counterparts to have ever attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in their community, worked with others in the community to try to solve community problems, and participated in a community improvement activity.

Multivariate Results

The multivariate results indicated that controlling for education, income, marital status, race, length of residence, and community of residence had very little effect on the nature or significance levels of the relationships of community

Table 2. Logistic Regression of "Having Ever Worked with Others in the Community to Try to Solve Community Problems" on Community Attachment, Community Satisfaction, and the Control Variables*

Variables	Odds ratios	
	Bivariate	Multivariate
Community attachment		
Multi-item attachment scale	2.09***	2.43**
Interest in community (1 = very interested)	2.90***	2.69**
Community satisfaction		
Satisfaction with domains	1.26	0.94
Overall satisfaction (1 = very satisfied)	1.26	0.52
Sociodemographic variables		
Education	1.59***	2.11***
Income	1.11*	1.00
Marital status (1 = married)	1.55	1.26
Race (1 = white)	1.95*	1.53
Length of residence	1.01	1.02**
Community of residence		
Community (1 = Stanton)	0.93	1.22
-2 log-likelihood		329.64
Model Chi Square		73.25***

*N = 293.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

However, the odds ratio for the effect of satisfaction with domains on having participated in any type of community improvement activity in the community dropped to non-significance (Table 3).

An examination of the multivariate models also reveals that the effect of income dropped to non-significance (Tables 1, 2, and 3). Higher educated persons were significantly more likely than lower educated persons to have attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in their community, worked with others in the community to try to solve community problems, and participated in a community improvement activity. Married individuals were significantly more likely than their counterparts to have ever attended a public meeting on town or school affairs in their community and participated in a community improvement activity. Whites were significantly more likely than non-whites to have participated in a community improvement activity. Long-term residents were significantly more likely than their shorter-term counterparts to have worked with others in the community to try to solve community problems and participated in a community improvement activity. And last, as in the bivariate models, the effect of community of residence remained non-significant.

Table 3. Logistic Regression of "Having Ever Participated in Any Type of Community Improvement Activity in the Community" on Community Attachment, Community Satisfaction, and the Control Variables^a

Variables	Odds ratios	
	Bivariate	Multivariate
Community attachment		
Multi-item attachment scale	1.76**	1.81*
Interest in community (1 = very interested)	2.06**	1.87*
Community satisfaction		
Satisfaction with domains	1.37*	1.18
Overall satisfaction (1 = very satisfied)	1.17	0.52
Sociodemographic variables		
Education	1.53***	1.77***
Income	1.13**	0.96
Marital status (1 = married)	2.40**	2.61**
Race (1 = white)	2.59***	2.47**
Length of residence	1.01	1.02**
Community of residence		
Community (1 = Stanton)	1.00	0.95
-2 log-likelihood		322.65
Model Chi Square		63.06***

^aN = 293.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

Limitations of the Findings and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the statistical significance of the findings, an important limitation of these data must be recognized. In this study, which was limited to two communities within a single state, individuals were asked only to indicate whether or not they had ever engaged in any of the three community-directed activities. In order to understand more fully the links between community attachment/community satisfaction and community action, further empirical research examining the *frequency* and *intensity* of participation in community-level behaviors is needed. Furthermore, in light of the findings presented here, additional studies are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of community attachment/community satisfaction on community action and the consequences of varying levels of community attachment, satisfaction, and action on community development activities. Such studies might address how community attachment and satisfaction promotes or retards the emergence of community and, concomitantly, efforts toward community development. Lastly, future research incorporating additional measures of community attachment, satisfaction, and action is warranted.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Two primary conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, the findings provide mixed support for the two hypotheses. While it appears that community satisfaction does not affect community action, these data indicate that community attachment is positively associated with action at the community level. Second, the results suggest that certain sociodemographic variables are important predictors of community action. The multivariate analyses show that higher educated, married, white, and longtime residents are more likely than their counterparts to engage in one or more actions at the community level.

Based upon the conclusions of this study, certain implications for the practice of community development can be offered. With respect to the first finding, that higher levels of attachment to one's community results in increased levels of community action, knowledge about individuals' levels of attachment and the potential effects on community-level action is undoubtedly important when it comes to designing and implementing robust community development activities. As several researchers have noted (e.g., Grisham, 1999; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 1985; Luloff & Wilkinson, 1990; Martin & Wilkinson, 1984), action at the local level is a critical resource for successful community development. As evidenced by this study, it appears that researchers, community developers, public leaders, Cooperative Extension personnel, and other practitioners working in the area of community development should identify and include in local development initiatives those residents who express strong attachments to their community.

The implications of the second finding are twofold. On one hand, higher educated, married, white, and longtime local residents should be invited and encouraged to become involved in community affairs. On the other hand, systematic efforts by local leaders, Cooperative Extension personnel, and other community practitioners are needed to broaden the base of community participation. Lower educated, single, non-white, and shorter-term residents should also be *purposively invited* and *encouraged* to become actively involved in their community, to work collectively to solve local problems, and to chart the course for future development.

NOTES

¹ See Theodori (2004) for a detailed description of the study-site selection process.

² In January of 2002, an informational letter was first mailed to a randomly selected sample of 500 households in Stanton and to the 423 residential addresses in Sanderson. The informational letter, which was printed in English on one side and Spanish on the other side, informed residents that their household was randomly selected for participation in an upcoming community study. Moreover, the letter indicated that although participation in the study would be entirely voluntary, completion and return of the questionnaire would automatically enter their household into a drawing for \$200.00. Included with the letter was a pre-paid addressed postcard. Residents were instructed to return the postcard if they preferred to receive a copy of the questionnaire printed in Spanish. Instructions on the postcard were printed in both English and Spanish. One household in Stanton and one in Sanderson asked for and received a copy of the questionnaire in Spanish. Eleven of the 500 initial informational letters were returned as undeliverable from the Stanton site. Those eleven households were replaced with randomly selected new addresses. Two of the eleven were returned as undeliverable; they were not replaced. Hence, the sample size was 498 in Stanton.

³ Comparisons of selected sociodemographic and economic characteristics between the sample and Census data are included in Appendix A.

⁴ Age and gender were initially included in the analyses with the other sociodemographic variables. However, they were excluded from the final models because both the bivariate and net effects of age and gender on each measure of community action were non-significant.

Appendix A. Selected Sociodemographic and Economic Characteristics of the Sample and Census Data

Selected Characteristics	Stanton		Sanderson	
	Census Data	Sample Data	Census Data	Sample Data
Median age (18 years and older)	43 ^a	49	51 ^a	58
% 65 years and older	14	25	20	35
% female	53	59	51	57
% white	74	77	87	63
% 25 and over high school graduate	59	86	71	88
% 25 and over college graduate	10	25	17	32
Median household income (dollars)	\$27,961	\$40,025 ^a	\$23,594	\$30,018 ^a

^a Median values were computed using the formula for the computation of the median from grouped data (see Blalock 1972, p. 66-68).

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