

## Place, Community Development, and Social Capital

Jeffrey C. Bridger and Theodore R. Alter

---

*Over the past decade, the concept of social capital has become an important component of many community development strategies. In this article we argue that social capital is predicated on assumptions that raise a number of questions about its usefulness in a variety of different settings. The most important features of social capital—trust and norms of reciprocity—emerge from repeated and regularized interactions that are bounded in space and time. They depend on an existing, relatively unproblematic relationship between place and social interaction. In many communities, this is not a tenable assumption. We conclude by suggesting that an interactional approach to community development can be a useful alternative.*

---

**Keywords:** social capital, community development, place, social interaction

Ever since the industrial revolution, and the rapid urbanization it spawned, the demise of place-based communities has been a popular theme in the sociological literature. By the middle of the twentieth century, local life was being so rapidly transformed that many scholars began to question the longstanding assumption that the community was a basic unit of social organization. Roland Warren (1972), in his well-known theory of the “Great Change,” argued that as communities became more reliant on extra-local institutions and sources of income, they were engulfed by forces that they could not control; important local decisions were increasingly made by people and organizations located hundreds or thousands of miles away. In his view, the local community was becoming merely a stage where outside groups pursued specific interests with little concern for the consequences their actions might have on local life.

Over the past few decades, economic globalization and rapid advances in communication technologies have led many scholars to argue that place-based communities have been even further undermined. Harvey (1973, 1996, 2001), for instance, argues that increasing capital mobility has engendered fierce competition for jobs and various forms of investment. Capital is always seeking more profitable ventures, and in the course of this search, social and economic landscapes can be radically and rapidly transformed:

The tension between place-bound fixity and spatial mobility of capital erupts into generalized crisis, however, when the landscape shaped in relation to a certain phase of development ... becomes a barrier to further accumulation. The geographic configuration of places must then be reshaped around new transport and communications systems and physical infrastructures, new centers and styles of production and consumption, new agglomerations of labor power, and modified social infrastructures ... Old places ... have to be devalued, destroyed, and redeveloped while new places are created (Harvey, 1996, p. 296).

---

Jeffrey C. Bridger is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Penn State University. Theodore R. Alter is Professor of Agricultural, Environmental, and Regional Economics in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Penn State University.

Of course, there is nothing new about this process of uneven development. What is new is the pace of change. Since about 1970, spatial reorganization has accelerated, threatening the security of individual communities and restricting the range of acceptable development options (Molotch & Logan, 1987; Harvey, 1996). When leaders and citizens face a threat to the existence of their community, they are likely to be more concerned with maintaining a favorable business climate than with issues such as social justice, equity, or environmental protection. After all, there is almost certainly another community willing to offer investors a more enticing incentive package.

Given this gloomy scenario, it would also be easy to conclude that place has become an irrelevant concept. On the contrary, place has been rediscovered by both scholars and the public. Perhaps, as Harvey (1996, p. 296) suggests, this is because “we worry about the meaning of place in general and of our place in particular when the security of actual places becomes generally threatened.” And in fact, the political and economic processes that destroy, commodify, and homogenize places have sparked interest in alternative conceptions of local community life. Movements such as the New Urbanism, Sustainable Community Development, and Smart Growth all reflect a desire to gain control over the forces that threaten to undermine local forms of community.

One of the most important recent attempts to provide a blueprint for reconnecting community and place can be found in Robert Putnam’s (2000) influential book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In his view, community revitalization depends on rebuilding our stocks of social capital, which he defines as “... a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (p. 18). Community development, from this perspective depends crucially on increasing participation in civic affairs. As Putnam (p. 403) puts it, we must “... address both the *supply* of opportunities for civic engagement and the *demand* for those opportunities.” This in turn will require the construction of new institutions and the redesign of existing ones. And of equal importance, if we hope to build strong local communities, we “... must resolve to become reconnected with our friends and families” (p. 414).

This is a laudable objective. In our view, however, it is predicated on problematic assumptions about the relationship between community and place. The most important features of social capital—trust and norms of reciprocity—emerge from repeated and regularized interactions that are bounded in time and space. In short, they depend on routine and consistent relationship between place and social interaction. Given the changes that have occurred in many communities, this constancy is not a realistic assumption.

In this paper, we begin by defining social capital and the relationship between social capital and place. Following this, we provide several examples that illustrate the complex, contingent, and turbulent relationship between people and place that now characterizes many localities. We conclude that social capital is not theoretically inclusive enough to provide a solid basis for development policy in many communities. We suggest that an alternative approach, based on the interactional theory of community organization (Wilkinson, 1991; Bridger & Luloff, 1999) is more relevant to the issues facing contemporary communities.

## **What is Social Capital?**

Although the term “social capital” appears to have first been coined in the early twentieth century by L. J. Hanifan, the state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia (Putnam, 2000, p.19), its recent popularity can be traced to the late 1980s, when James Coleman published an influential article entitled “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” According to Coleman (1988S, p. 98),

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspects of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors ... within the structure. Like

other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.

This is a vague definition; and, as DeFilippis (2001) argues, it suggests that social capital consists simultaneously of outcomes, actions, and relationships. Despite this confusion, Coleman (1988) is clear on two important points: social capital is a resource that is available to individuals, and it is morally and ethically neutral (DeFilippis, 2001; Edwards & Foley, 1998). Simply put, social capital is a resource that facilitates action—and that action can be positive or negative.

Because of its individualism and moral neutrality, Coleman's definition of social capital did not generate much interest in community development circles when it first appeared. All this changed when Putnam (1993, 1995, 1996, 2000) redefined social capital in three important ways. First, and most important, he argued that it was a resource that could be aggregated to the level of the community or even the nation state. Second, it became almost synonymous with civil society, specifically a neo-Toquevillean view of civil society in which "... voluntary, non-government associations, based on trust, become the institutions through which social capital is generated" (DeFilippis, 2001, p. 785). Finally, in Putnam's hands, social capital became normatively appealing, and it was credited for all sorts of desirable outcomes ranging from good government, to reduced crime, to economic development (DeFilippis, 2001).

To understand the importance of the conceptual shift social capital has undergone and its implications for community development, it is useful to examine Putnam's definition in more detail. According to Putnam (2000, p.19):

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense, social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations.

The norms of generalized reciprocity and trustworthiness are the key components of this definition. The norm of generalized reciprocity is embodied in the idea that "I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident in the "... expectation that you will help me out in the future" (Putnam, 2000, p. 135). Generalized reciprocity is characterized by a continuing relationship of exchange that at any one point in time is probably unbalanced. What is important is that there is a mutual expectation that a favor or benefit performed now will be repaid in the future. When the norm of generalized reciprocity is followed, opportunism can be more easily restrained and the potential for collective action enhanced. It works to reconcile self-interest and social solidarity because each act involves a combination of short-term altruism and long-term self-interest. In communities where this norm is widely followed, social and economic life is less fractious because "transaction costs" are greatly reduced (Putnam, 2000).

When people are committed to the norm of generalized reciprocity, a very specific and valuable form of trust emerges. This is what Putnam calls social trust, which he defines as a willingness to give people, even those we don't know, the benefit of the doubt. Or, put in slightly different terms, social trust is embodied in the belief that people are essentially good and can be expected to do the right thing. According to Putnam, social trust leads to healthier, more active communities because it produces better citizens:

Other things being equal, people who trust their fellow citizens volunteer more often, contribute more to charity, participate more often in politics and community organizations, serve more readily on juries, give blood more frequently, comply more fully with their tax obligations, are more tolerant of minority views, and display many other forms of

civic virtue... In short, people who trust others are all-round good citizens, and those more engaged in community life are both more trusting and more trustworthy (p. 137). The crucial question, especially for community development, is: how does the norm of reciprocity and the social trust to which it gives rise, develop? Putnam argues that the norm of reciprocity grows out of dense networks of social interaction. When people interact frequently with one another, they tend to develop strong norms regarding behavioral expectations. At the same time, repeated encounters across projects and activities decrease the likelihood that people will engage in opportunistic behaviors because this would put at risk the benefits they expect to receive from future transactions. Finally, a dense network facilitates the flow of information and gossip about the trustworthiness of its members

## **Place, Community, and Social Capital**

Critics (Edwards & Foley, 1998; Foley & Edwards, 1998; DeFilippis, 2001) have argued that Putnam's emphasis on trust, norms, and the shared values that grow out of social networks is based on a highly selective reading of civil society—specifically the views expressed by de Tocqueville (1835) in *Democracy in America*. As DeFilippis (1997, p. 791) argues, in the America de Tocqueville visited,

... [V]oluntary associations arose as win-win situations precisely because the interests of people involved were shared. De Tocqueville visited the United States before the emergence of industrial capitalism and the classes it created. Putnam's view is possible only if you erase the very real material interests that divide us... and create a vision of civil society as solely constituted by people and groups with mutual interests.

And, even in de Tocqueville's day, participation in civil society was limited to a rather narrow segment of the population (Barber, 1999).

In our view, such a mutuality of interests also arose because of a historically specific relationship between community and place. To see why this is so, it is important to understand that networks, norms, and trust are context dependent. Social networks are not free floating; they are bounded by space and time. The networks that give rise to social capital depend heavily on face-to-face interaction over time. To the extent that this is an accurate assessment, it suggests that the kind of networks and norms that social capitalists celebrate depend, almost by definition, on particular conception of community—a place where the physical boundaries are well defined, where the people share common institutions, and where there are few social cleavages. This description, of course, more closely resembles the small agrarian communities of the nineteenth century than those of today.

As sociological studies of community life have documented repeatedly, the relationship between community and place has become increasingly tenuous and contingent (Leach, 1999; Sennett, 1998; Kunstler, 1993; Wilkinson, 1991). In addition to such well-known forces as urbanization, modernization, capital mobility, and advances in transportation and communication, the transformation of work has made it increasingly difficult for people to remain in one place for long:

Business leaders and journalists emphasize the global marketplace and the use of new technologies as the hallmarks of the capitalism of our time. This is true enough, but misses another important dimension of change: new ways of organizing time, particularly working time ... The most tangible sign of that change might be the motto "No long term." ... Today, a young American with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times in the course of working, and change his or her skill base at least three times during those forty years of labor (Sennett, 1998, p. 22).

With people changing jobs this often, it is unlikely that they will remain in the same community long enough to build the strong social networks upon which social capital depends.

But what about workers with less than a college education? It seems that they too move often to labor in a series of temporary jobs. This trend is clearly reflected in the growth of temporary employment agencies. There were 800 such firms in 1956. By 1993, there were over 16,000 (Leach, 1999). By the late 1990s, many of these firms merged, producing what Leach (1999, p. 68) calls “... one stop shopping able to satisfy any temporary-staffing necessity.”

One of the most serious consequences of the widespread use of temporary labor is that it has given rise to large pools of people who, although they may reside in a common location, have precious little in common. As Leach (1999, p. 75) explains, the new economy has created

... huge urban agglomerations whose very character has been determined by the growth of contingent labor pools and whose identity as places is the very placelessness that afflicts them ... The informal work economy, which operates generally underground or beyond convention and law, and involves mostly recent immigrant labor (illegal and legal, children and adults), has brought together masses of people from every point in the world, people whose only bond is their contingency.

As critics (Bridger & Luloff, 2001; DeFillipis, 2001) have noted, it is difficult to explain how social capital can arise in places with such diverse and ephemeral populations. To solve this problem, Putnam (2000) makes a distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is a “sociological superglue” found in very dense networks such those characteristic of some ethnic groups and religious organizations. Bonding social capital tends to reinforce solidarity and promotes specific reciprocity. The ethnic niche that emerges when a particular group restricts employment opportunities by controlling a sector of the local labor market is a good example of bonding social capital. This solidarity might provide substantial benefits to one part of the population, but it hardly promotes the interests of the larger community.

Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is similar to Granovetter’s (1973) concept of weak ties. Instead of creating tight bonds of solidarity, it provides people with access to outside resources and promotes information diffusion by creating linkages across “... diverse social cleavages” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Most importantly, by fostering relationships across class, ethnic, and religious lines, bridging social capital creates broader identities and fosters social trust and norms of generalized reciprocity.

## **Social Capital in Rural and Urban Communities**

Social capital theorists argue that communities depend on a balance between both kinds of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). Unfortunately, however, a variety of forces makes such a balance very difficult to achieve. In fact, the appropriate blend of bonding and bridging social capital is much more easily identified in theory than in practice. This is especially true in the places most in need of community development—our rural and urban localities.

### *Rural Communities*

Consider rural areas first. Historically, in many rural communities, bridging social capital has been in short supply, primarily because rurality affects the probability distribution of different kinds of interpersonal relationships (Wilkinson, 1984; 1991). The more rural the location, the greater the distance between population units. As the distance between units increases, the probability of contact between any two units decreases. What this means is that the kind and number of contacts that give rise to bridging social capital are reduced. According to Wilkinson (1991, p. 85), “... a rural settlement pattern restricts the presence of strangers or nearstrangers with whom to interact. Available contacts tend to be repeated and thus become strong ties. Indeed, there appears to be no shortage of strong ties associated with ruralness but a decided shortage... of weak ties.”

At first glance, the disproportionate number of strong ties in rural areas would seem to bode well for social well-being. After all, dense networks promote high levels of solidarity and strong norms of reciprocity. At the same time, however, the lack of weak ties militates against the development of a complete local society because there are relatively few linkages between clusters of strong ties. Moreover, because ruralness creates an opportunity structure for certain forms of contact, it can foster certain kinds of social problems. The idea here is that different kinds of social and personal disruptions tend to occur in different types of social contacts. A substantial number of homicides, for instance, are committed by an intimate associate of the victim (Paulozzi, et al., 2001). Other problems can be traced to isolation from larger social structures. Studies of suicides have consistently implicated social isolation as a causative factor (Trout, 1980; De Leo & Spathonis, 2004). Similarly, isolation from the community and social service agencies is an important risk factor in child abuse and neglect (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Hashima & Amato, 1994). And while much research remains to be done, there is evidence to suggest that the social structure of rural areas may contribute to these and other social disruptions. Suicide rates, for instance, are consistently higher in rural areas, especially for white males (Wilkinson, 1991; Kaplan & Geling, 1998).

Even in those instances when the prevalence of social problems in rural areas is similar to the nation as a whole, the lack of bridging social capital may make it more difficult to address them effectively in rural communities. Domestic violence provides a good example. Although there have been few comparative studies of domestic violence, the best data available suggests that rates are similar across rural and urban areas (Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2001). There are, however, rural urban differences in police responses to domestic violence and disputes. In a study of domestic abuse in rural Kentucky, Websdale (1998) found that because the police are often part of the victim and victimizer's social network, they were less likely to arrest the victimizer:

Susan reported that nearly the whole community knew that her husband beat her brutally on a regular basis. However, the local police officer in the small town where they lived in Western Kentucky did not offer her any protection. She told me that the local constable was her husband's brother and refused to arrest her husband (p. 103). Police who were less well integrated into the community were more likely enforce laws against domestic violence. The women Websdale (1998) interviewed reported that the state police were more willing to arrest the abuser and remove him from the home. Perhaps the state police were better trained and more professional, but their lack of close ties to the community probably also made it easier for them to enforce the law dispassionately.

As globalization flattens and shrinks the world (Friedman, 2005), it is arguable that bridging social capital is becoming more abundant. After all, communities and individuals now have more access to information and more ties to the outside world than ever before. This shift potentially provides what Woolcock (1998) calls "linking" social capital—relationships with external institutions that provide access to information, resources, and ideas that are not available at the local level. At the same time, however, the economic restructuring that is an intrinsic feature of globalization is fundamentally altering the rural landscape in ways that have important implications for bonding and bridging social capital. Manufacturing, which has been the most important economic sector in rural America since World War II, has declined markedly in recent years. Losses have been especially rapid since 2000. Between 2000 and 2003, rural areas saw a 19 % decrease in manufacturing jobs, compared to a 14 % loss in urban locations (USDA, 2003). In the wake of recent trade agreements and tariff reductions, many traditional rural industries such as textiles, apparel, plastics, and wood products have moved to foreign locations with lower wages and fewer environmental regulations (Falk & Labao, 2003). And although manufacturing employment has stabilized since 2003, many rural industries continue to shed jobs at a rapid pace.

Communities that depend on agriculture have also suffered. Small farms have been disappearing for several decades, but recent changes in the structure of agriculture have accelerated the losses. As Drabenstott (2001, p.10) points out, there has been a decisive shift “... from the production of commodities to finely graded products and a shift from spot and futures markets to contracts” (p. 10). Instead of producing generic commodities for sale on the open market, many farmers are now the first link in a business alliance called a supply chain (Buttel, 2003). Farmers now find themselves in a buyer’s market where they have little choice but to contract with one of a handful of large, vertically integrated firms who control most of the global food and fiber industry.

Of all the consequences that have flowed from the economic transformation of rural America, two have especially important implications for social capital. First, and most obviously, industrial restructuring has led to rapid population losses in many rural areas. Between 1990 and 2000, 25 % of non-metropolitan counties lost population. Remote and farm-dependent counties were the most seriously affected. Over half of these places had fewer people in 200 than in 1990, and in over a third of these places, the loss exceeded 5 % (McGranahan & Beale, 2002). As population losses mount, businesses and institutions disappear, local societies become more fragmented, and residents become more isolated from larger social structures. Lack of local employment opportunities has also forced many residents to make long daily commutes, which reduces the time available to devote to civic affairs. Under these circumstances, bridging social capital becomes increasingly scarce.

At the same time, many rural communities have become much more ethnically diverse. In South and Midwest, industrial restructuring has led to unprecedented Latino population growth spurred primarily by employment opportunities in the meat packing and processing industry (Saenz & Torres, 2003). During the 1980s and 1990s, the meat processing industry underwent a major transformation, “... leading to the displacement high-wage beef and pork processing workers in the Midwest and poultry plant workers in the South, and the movement of meat packing plants from urban to rural areas (Saenz & Torres, 2003, p. 59). Employers have actively recruited people from Mexico and other Latin American countries to create a reserve army of workers willing to labor in dangerous jobs for wages that are substantially lower than twenty or thirty years ago, when the industry was heavily unionized (Schlosser, 2002).

A high turnover rate, driven by low pay and dangerous working conditions, has created a transient labor force that roams from town to town looking for better opportunities. In most places, the migrants are housed in isolated trailer courts, or they share rooms in dilapidated hotels (Schlosser, 2002). Not surprisingly, these workers are socially excluded from the broader community, and what little interaction does occur is centered around commercial transactions (Preibisch, 2004). In such communities, the presence of a transient labor force (workers who often speak only Spanish) further hampers the development of bridging social capital, and it may actually create a more insular mentality among long time residents who see migrants as a source of crime and other social problems (Schlosser, 2002). And even when these workers become permanent residents, they tend to remain socially and physically isolated (Preibisch, 2004).

### *Urban Communities*

Many inner cities also lack social capital. In this case, however, the evidence suggests that there are serious shortages of both bonding and bridging social capital (Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990; Parish, Hao, & Hogan, 1991; Eggebeen, 1992; Furstenberg, 1993; Green, Hammer, & Tiggs, 2000; Smith, 2005). And as has been the case in rural America, social capital has been undermined by economic changes that are altering the relationships between people and the relationships between people and place.

Perhaps the most striking change in contemporary urban life is the growth of high poverty areas, which are defined as census tracts with a poverty rate of 40 % or higher (Jargowsky, 1997). Between 1970 and 1990, the number of these areas more than doubled from 1,177 to 2,726 (Jargowsky, 1997). Not surprisingly, the population residing in these neighborhoods also grew - from approximately 4.1 million to 8.0 million. Most of this growth occurred in our largest metropolises, especially those in the Northeast and Midwest (Jargowsky, 1997). And although the number of people living in poverty declined slightly between 1990 and 2000, the poverty rate in our inner cities (18.4 %) is still twice as high as it is in the suburbs (8.3 %) (Berube & Frey, 2002).

While many factors have contributed to high inner city poverty rates, much of the increase can be attributed to structural shifts in the global economy. Up until the 1960s, low-skilled, poorly educated workers could find well-paying jobs in the heavily unionized manufacturing sector. In the intervening years, urban economies have changed dramatically as service and administrative functions have supplanted manufacturing as the most important source of employment. Kasarda (1993, p. 45) summarizes the processes that underlie this shift.

Advances in transportation, communication, and industrial technologies have ... transformed cities from centers of the production and distribution of goods to centers of administration, finance, and information exchange. In the process, many blue-collar jobs that once constituted the economic backbone of cities and provided employment opportunities for their poorly educated residents have either vanished or moved. These jobs have been replaced, at least in part, by knowledge-intensive white-collar jobs with educational requirements that exclude many with substandard education.

Nowhere can the impact of these economic changes be seen more clearly than in Chicago. Consider, for instance, the North Lawndale area of the city, which was at one time a thriving African American working class community. During the 1960s, there were several factories that provided residents with good paying jobs. By the 1980s, nearly every major employer had either moved to the suburbs or abandoned the state entirely (Wilson, 1996). Almost half of the housing stock has disappeared, and only one bank remains to serve 66,000 residents. Most of the other businesses that serve the neighborhood are best described as predatory—lottery agents, currency exchange and check-cashing centers, and over ninety-nine bars and liquor stores (Wilson, 1996, p. 35).

The economic devastation that has been visited on North Lawndale and thousands of other neighborhoods across the nation set off a series of additional changes that further undermined the social, cultural, and economic life of the residents left behind. First, as soon as redlining and the other illegal barriers that kept African American middle class residents in ghetto neighborhoods were removed, they followed the example of other ethnic groups and headed for the suburbs. By definition, out-migration of the non-poor reduces a neighborhood's aggregate income and hence makes it poorer. However, the significance of out-migration by the African American middle-class goes far beyond the immediate effects it had on neighborhood income. Wilson (1987) argues that the loss of the Black middle-class (and the Black working-class in many inner-cities), removed an important social buffer that could have protected these neighborhoods from the most severe dislocations caused by macro-economic changes. Even if the most poorly educated segment of the population was experiencing higher levels and longer spells of unemployment, the presence of a substantial middle-class would have ensured the viability of such important community institutions as stores, churches, quality schools, and recreational facilities. Without an economically stable class to support these entities, the institutional fabric of many communities became threadbare.

The presence of a middle-class would also have provided children—who were constituting a larger and larger proportion of the population in many ghetto areas—with important role models to keep alive “... the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm,



not the exception” (Wilson, 1987, p. 56). In the absence of conventional role models and the norms and values they espoused, lawlessness, truancy, drug abuse, and other forms of pathological behavior became more acceptable (Wilson, 1987).

Paradoxically, the growth of high poverty areas does not mean that the population of these neighborhoods is increasing. In fact, in many instances poverty concentration is accompanied by steep population declines. This phenomenon, which is common in cities across the nation, exacerbates the pernicious effects of poverty. For one thing, as the population drops, it becomes harder and harder to maintain basic services and neighborhood institutions. The local population cannot support stores and few outsiders are likely to frequent areas known to be plagued with drugs and crime. As the organizational structure weakens, formal and informal mechanisms of control begin to disappear, leading to higher rates of crime and violence, which in turn hastens neighborhood deterioration. And, once a neighborhood begins to slide, institutional disinvestment almost inevitably follows.

Declines in population density make it increasingly difficult to sustain a sense of community, especially when the residents left behind are those who were least connected to local institutions and least involved in community affairs (Wilson, 1996). For instance, several studies (Wilson, 1996; Furstenberg, 1993) have found that while the overall rate of social interaction remains high in inner-city neighborhoods, it appears to differ in important ways from the neighboring described by Carol Stack in her classic book, *All Our Kin* (1974). Stack, whose research was conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, describes a society characterized by extensive social networks and high levels of material and social support. The residents may have been poor, but they knew they could count on neighbors and kin for childcare, cash assistance, food, temporary shelter, and other resources. The residents also maintained a sense of order and community by monitoring each other for evidence of shirking responsibility or taking advantage of someone, and punishing those who did not obey neighborhood norms (Stack, 1974).

Interviews with residents in high poverty neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Denver, and Chicago (Wilson, 1996; Furstenberg, 1993) suggest that while they may know and interact with their neighbors, the bonding social capital documented by Stack has become scarce. Sharing between neighbors and friends is not as common as in earlier years, and residents are unable to cooperate and establish effective neighborhood norms, especially around the behavior of children and adolescents (Furstenberg, 1993).

As the urban poor have become socially and spatially isolated from the larger society, the worst consequences of poverty have been exacerbated. Interaction with individuals from other socioeconomic levels has become very infrequent, distrust has become more common, mechanisms of social control have become ineffective, there is little exposure to conventional role models, and illegal sources of income have become acceptable (Wilson, 1996). Not surprisingly, it is difficult to build social capital in this environment.

In her recent extension of Wilson’s thesis, Smith (2003, 2005) argues that the lack of social capital among the urban poor (especially the Black urban poor) has less to do with social isolation and more to do with the way in which macro-structural changes have led to a deterioration of obligations of exchange among inner-city residents. According to this line of reasoning, as jobs disappear and material resources become scarcer and scarcer, trust declines and residents become more protective of the few resources they still possess. Under these circumstances, residents feel less obligated to exchange information and other resources. When joblessness becomes a pervasive feature of life, residents have fewer sanctions to impose on those who do not abide by norms, and fewer rewards to offer those who do. As it becomes harder to control noncompliant behavior, crime proliferates, predatory behavior increases, and the fear of victimization grows. Once this process gains momentum, trust and norms of reciprocity break down; residents are afraid of one another and unwilling to share scarce resources. Eventually, norms that privilege the individual over the collective good begin to dominate local life and social capital declines.

## The Interactional Approach to Community Development

Social capital has resonated with a wide range of audiences, largely because it holds the promise of effectively replacing the “primordial bonds” that held communities together in simpler times (Coleman, 1992). Social capital, in this view, will enable us to rebuild the once harmonious communities that have been undermined by the forces of modernization. The problem with this prescription is that the vital features of social capital—trust and norms of reciprocity—depend, in large measure, on stable and predictable social relations. Unfortunately, the places where many of us live have become anything but stable and predictable. The trends described above have fundamentally altered local social and economic structures in ways that make it difficult to develop a healthy mix of bonding and bridging social capital. Instability is now *the* distinguishing feature of many communities. Social capital cannot flourish in this environment, and this raises serious questions about its role in community development.

In our view, effective community development policies must be more firmly rooted in a theory of contemporary community social and economic organization. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to develop fully such a model, we can offer a few suggestions for how to approach this task. Most definitions of community contain four elements: a locality, a local society, collective actions, and mutual identity. Each of these elements is problematic in today’s world. Community boundaries are no longer clear, extra-local forces drive many community processes, collective actions often express private rather than public interests, and identities are often tied more to special interests than to the local community. In short, the contemporary community is amazingly complex. It is “... an arena of both turbulence and cohesion, of order and disarray, of self-seeking and community-oriented interaction; and it manifests its dualities simultaneously” (Wilkinson, 1991, p. 7).

One way to make sense of all of these forces is to search for a constant. Despite the many changes communities have undergone, social interaction remains a consistent feature of local life. “Social interaction delineates a territory as the community locale; it provides the associations that comprise the local society; it gives structure and direction to processes of collective action; and it is the source of community identity” (Wilkinson, 1991, p. 13). From this perspective, social interaction gives form to local life as people organize to accomplish specific tasks and pursue various interests. Community simply depends on interaction. Thus, there is a latent potential for community to emerge in almost any setting, no matter how turbulent it may be. Community development nurtures this possibility.

Unlike conceptions of community that are more static, this interactional approach does not define community in terms of well-defined networks or systems. Instead, local groups and organizations are conceptualized as unbounded fields of interaction. The community is composed of several of these more or less distinct social fields. For instance, in most communities it is possible to identify social fields focused on different aspects of local life such as social services, economic development, recreation, and public safety. The mechanism that links the various special interest fields to form a local society is the community field. Although this is also an interactional field, it does not pursue limited, special interests. Instead, it cuts across various groups and interaction fields. Most importantly, the community field “... combines the locality relevant aspects of the specialized interest fields, and integrates them into a generalized whole” (Wilkinson, 1991:19). The actions that occur in the community field coordinate the more narrowly focused actions that happen in other social fields, and in the process binds them into a larger whole—albeit an unbounded, dynamic, emergent whole.

Both the social capital and interactional perspectives stress the importance of creating linkages across interest lines. Social capital-based efforts approach this task by building trust and norms of reciprocity that will facilitate various actions. The interactional approach takes a different tack by stressing the importance of forging connections between the

**actions** of different groups and organizations. By creating these linkages, a generalized structure of relationships emerges—one that can be used to address shared problems and concerns. Community development involves purposive attempts to build this generalized structure (Wilkinson, 1991). Of course, trust and norms of reciprocity may emerge during the course of this process, but they are not a prerequisite for community development. More importantly, they are not a focal point of development efforts.

As the community field develops, interaction and structure become closely intertwined. Indeed, it “... is both a consequence and a cause of community actions in special interest areas. It arises from the other actions and fields, drawing together their commonalities. Having emerged, it influences subsequent actions, reinforcing the holistic structure of community that exists among them” (Wilkinson, 1991:90). Of course, the processes of interaction that give rise to and are in turn shaped by the community field are in a continuous state of change. This fluctuation means that the community field is also dynamic over time as actors come and go, different interests assert themselves, and extra-local forces impinge on community life (Bridger & Luloff, 1999). At times, the community field may be strong, and at times, it may be relatively weak. In many of our distressed rural and urban communities, the community field is held together by fragile bonds. But regardless of its state at a particular time, community development aims to strengthen the community field by building from existing fields of interaction to find points of intersection around which actions can occur and linkages made (Luloff & Bridger, 2003).

This approach requires that residents and community development practitioners focus on the **community**, even when an effort or program is directed at a specific problem. To take just one example, consider leadership development. There is little disagreement that successful communities depend on strong leadership. Unfortunately, leadership development programs do not always ensure that individual gains will also benefit the common good. All too often, newly acquired leadership skills contribute more to individual careers than to the capacity of the community to solve problems. Similarly, when leadership development focuses heavily on specialized issues and subject matter, it can lead to fragmentation and hinder efforts to mobilize resources for community-wide efforts.

By incorporating elements of the interactional perspective into curricula, leadership development programs can simultaneously build individual skills and foster community development. For instance, leadership development can focus on building the skills needed to identify issues where the interests of different groups may overlap, learn how to frame situations to highlight mutual benefits, and develop strategies that will foster concerted action. Programs can also include models of community action, and participants can learn where there are opportunities in the action process for structure-building activities. Role-playing opportunities can help participants build the skills needed to create connections across groups and activities. Finally, leadership development programs can emphasize the importance of explicitly and carefully considering how actions will affect all segments of the community and how this, in turn, will likely affect the structure of the community field.

## CONCLUSION

Choosing an appropriate community development strategy obviously depends on local conditions. In places with a history of civic engagement and a lack of deep social cleavages, a social capital approach may be particularly effective. In Portland Oregon, for instance, residents have been able to capitalize on a strong tradition of widespread civic participation to enact a wide range of progressive policies that have made Portland one of the most livable cities in the United States (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). These policies include the establishment of an anti-sprawl urban growth boundary, extensive green space, and economically diverse neighborhoods.

In inner city neighborhoods like the North Lawndale section of Chicago, where fear, violence, and crime are pervasive, a reliance on social capital as a community development strategy may be less realistic. The creation of social capital is time and labor intensive, and in communities characterized by social isolation and fragmentation, building trust and norms of reciprocity is a daunting challenge. Instead, it arguably makes more sense to identify existing fields of interaction and the issues on which they focus, and develop linkages between the activities in these interactional fields. In Norfolk, Virginia, for instance, the Consortium for Immunization of Norfolk's Children (CINCH) assessed the activities of different social service providers, worked to find activities on which they could collaborate, and eventually developed a broad-based approach to child health that addresses such issues as drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse and neglect, and physical fitness (Bridger, 2000).

The network of relationships that grow out of this process are not likely to be as dense as those from which social capital (especially bonding social capital) emerges. At the same time, however, precisely because they are not as dense, they are probably less fragile in certain respects and more likely to become a durable feature of local life. In fact, several studies have shown that active communities tend to remain active over time, suggesting that as the process is set in motion, the community field becomes an institutionalized feature of local life that strengthens the capacity to address problems and enhance social well-being (Luloff & Wilkinson, 1979; Claude et al., 2000; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). While this will not produce a full-fledged revival of community life, it is probably a more realistic outcome to hope for in many places.

## REFERENCES

- Barber, B. (1998). *A Place for Us: How to make Society Civil and Democracy Strong*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bender, T. (1978). *Community and Social Change in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Berube, A., & Frey, W. H. (2002). *A Decade of Mixed Blessings: Urban and Suburban Poverty in Census 2000*. The Brookings Institution.
- Bridger, J. C. (2000). Low income families and social isolation: Research findings and intervention strategies. Report to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- Bridger, J. C., & Luloff, A. E. (1999). Toward an interactional approach to sustainable community development. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 15(4): 377-388.
- Bridger, J. C., & Luloff, A. E. (2001). Building the sustainable community: Is social capital the answer? *Sociological Inquiry*, 71(4): 458-472.
- Buttel, F. H. (1993). Continuities and disjunctures in the transformation of the U.S. agro-food system. Pp. 177-189 in D. L. Brown and L. E. Swanson (Eds.), *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Claude, L. M., Bridger, J. C., & Luloff, A. E. (2000). Community well-being and local activeness. Pp. 39-45 in P. V. Schaeffer & S. Loveridge (Eds.), *Small Town and Rural Economic Development: A Case Studies Approach*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Coleman, J. (1993). The rational reconstruction of society. *American Sociological Review*, 58(1): 1-15.
- Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(supplement): S95-S120.
- DeFilippis, J. (2001). The myth of social capital in community development. *Housing Policy Debate*, 12(4): 781-806.
- De Leo, D., & Spathonis, K. (2004). Culture and suicide in late life. *Psychiatric Times*, Vol. XX [Electronic Version] Retrieved 12/2/05 from [www.psychiatrictimes.com](http://www.psychiatrictimes.com)
- de Tocqueville, A. (1835). *Democracy in America*. Reprint 1988. Ed. P. Ranshaw, trans. H. Reeve, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Drabenstott, M. (2001). "New policies for a new rural America." *International Regional Science Review*, 24(1):3-15.

- Edwards, B., & Foley, M. W. (1998). Social capital and civil society beyond Putnam. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 42(1):124-39.
- Eggebeen, D. J. (1992). From generation unto generation: Parent-child support in aging American families. *Generations*, 16(3):45-49.
- Eggebeen, D. J., & Hogan, D. P. (1990). Giving between generations in American families. *Human Nature*, 1(2):211-232.
- Falk, W. W., & Labao, L. M. (2003). Who benefits from economic restructuring? Lessons from the past, challenges for the future. Pp. 152-165 in D. L. Brown & L. E. Swanson (Eds.). *Challenges for Rural America in the Twenty-First Century*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Fink, L. (2003). "The place of community in globalization." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49(44): B12.
- Foley, M. W., & Edwards, B. (1998, September 3-6). Is it time to disinvest in social capital? Paper presented at the 94<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA.
- Green, G. P., Hammer R. B., & Tigges, L. M. (2000). Someone to count on: Informal support. Pp. 244-263 in D. L. Sjoquist (Ed.). *The Atlanta Paradox*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Furstenberg, F. F., Jr. (1993). How families manage risk and opportunity in dangerous neighborhoods. Pp. 231-258 in W. J. Wilson (Ed.). *Sociology and the Public Agenda*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Gabarino, J., & Kostelny, K. (1992). Child maltreatment as a community problem. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 16:455-467.
- Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6)1360-80.
- Hashima, P. Y., & Amato, P. R. (1994). Poverty, social support, and parental behavior. *Child Development*, 65:394-403.
- Harvey, D. (1973). *Social Justice and the City*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harvey, D. (1996). *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Harvey, D. (2001). *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*. New York: Routledge.
- Jargowsky, P. A. (1997). *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Kaplan, M. S., & Geling, O. (1998). Firearm suicide and homicide in the United States: Regional variations and patterns of gun ownership. *Social Science and Medicine* 46(9): 1227-1233.
- Kasarda, J. D. (1993). Urban industrial transition and the underclass. Pp. 43-64 in W. J. Wilson (Ed.). *The Ghetto Underclass: Social Science Perspectives*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Kunstler, J. H. (1993). *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. New York: Touchstone.
- Leach, W. (1999). *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Luloff, A. E., & Bridger, J. C. (2003). Community agency and local development. Pp. 203-213 in D. L. Brown & L. E. Swanson (Eds.). *Challenges for Rural America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Luloff, A. E., & Wilkinson, K. P. (1979). Participation in the national flood insurance program: A study of community activeness. *Rural Sociology*, 44(1): 137-152.
- McGranahan, D. A., & Beale, C. L. (2002). Understanding rural population loss. *Rural America*, 17(4):2-8.
- Molotch, H. L. & Logan, J. R. (1987). *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Parish, W., Hao, L., & Hogan, D. P. (1991). Family support networks, welfare, and work among young mothers. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53:203-215.
- Paulozzi, L. J., Saltzman, L. E., Thompson, M. P., & Holmgreen, P. (2002). Surveillance for homicide among intimate partners – United States, 1981-1998. Centers for Disease Control [Electronic Version] Retrieved 12/2/05 from [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5003a1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5003a1.htm)
- Preibisch, K. (2004). Social relations and practices between seasonal agricultural Workers, their employers, and the residents of rural Ontario. Executive Summary. The North-South Institute.

- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1):65-78.
- Putnam, R. D. (1996). The strange disappearance of civic America. *American Prospect*, Winter: 34-38.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Putman, R. D., & Feldstein, L. M. (2003). *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Schlosser, E. (2002). *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: Perennial.
- Saenz, R., & Torres, C. C. (2003). Latinos in Rural America. Pp. 57-72 in D. L. Brown & L. E. Swanson (Eds.). *Challenges for Rural America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Sennett, R. (1998). *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Smith, S. S. (2003). Exploring the efficacy of African-Americans' job referral networks: A study of the obligations of exchange around job information and influence. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, (26)6:1029-1045
- Smith, S. S. (2005). "Don't put my name on it": Social capital activation and job-finding assistance among the black urban poor. *American Journal of Sociology*, 111(1): 1-57.
- Stack, C. B. (1974). *All Our Kin*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Trout, D. L. (1980). The role of social isolation in suicide. *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, 10(Spring):10-23.
- United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2003). "Rural America at a glance." *Rural Development Research Report Number, 97-1*, September
- Warren, R. L. (1972). *The Community in America. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company.
- Websdale, N. (1998). *Rural Women Battering and the Justice System: An Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Weisheit, R. A., & Donnermeyer, J. F. (2000). "Change and continuity in rural crime, vol. 1". [Electronic Version] Retrieved 12/01/05 from [www.ncjrs.org/criminal\\_justice2000/vol.1/02g.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/criminal_justice2000/vol.1/02g.pdf)
- Wilkinson, K. P. (1984). Rurality and patterns of social disruption. *Rural Sociology*, 49(1):23-36.
- Wilkinson, K. P. (1991). *The Community in Rural America*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Woolcock, M. (1998). Social capital: implications for development theory, research, and policy. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 15(2): 225-249.