Community Assessment Scales: The State of the Art

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THE STATE OF THE ART

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Community development activities are founded on the assumption that citizens have some concept of a "good community" toward which they want to move. Attention needs to be given to how community developers can determine citizen values and attitudes about the type of community that they want. Community assessment scales (CAS's) have been used as one means of measuring community attitudes and desires.

This paper explores the state of the art of the development and use of CAS's. The conclusions are that there has been only minimal use of CAS's and that there are many conceptual and methodological problems with the existing scales.

It is suggested that CAS's, if properly designed, could be useful and practical tools for community development.

Community developers are constantly seeking to mobilize people to improve the quality of life in the communities or neighborhoods in which they live and work. Most community developers operate with unspoken -- and perhaps un-clarified -- assumptions about what kind of community they desire or believe that the people in the community desire.

It would seem apparent that if community developers are serious about wanting to enable a community to fulfill its own goals for itself, they would want to discover, by some systematic means, what the citizens want the community to be -- how they define a "good community" (23). One of the means that has been used to achieve this end is survey research designed to identify people's preferences about various aspects of community life -- either how they evaluate present aspects of their communities or what kinds of improvements that they would like to see in their communities.

We surveyed the literature in several disciplines to analyze the various kinds of community attitude survey instruments that have been developed. In selecting the "community assessment scales" to be analyzed, we included only those that sought to measure fairly broad aspects of the community. We excluded, therefore, scales that focused only on specific, limited aspects or institutions of communities.

We found, first of all, that relatively little research has been directed toward measuring citizen attitudes toward the community. We were able to identify only twenty scales. (We will not analyze all twenty scales, but only illustrative ones within each of the categories we have developed.) Some had apparently never been used in research studies (or the results have never been published) and in other cases the research was reported but the scales were not presented. Many of the available community assessment scales were extremely rudimentary.

We also found that the content of the scales was seldom related to clear definitions of the central concepts used nor to theories which would identify the major variables which should be considered in developing a concept of "good community." Only a few scales organize the responses into sophisticated analytical categories and are cognizant of the methodological problems inherent in this type of research.

In the following analysis of community assessment scales, we divide the scales into three categories. Each category

reflects a particular set of concerns, a distinct purpose, and a specific orientation to quality of life in a community; we try to make these underlying orientations explicit. Then we describe the content of specific scales within each category -- the types of questions and formats used to obtain the data. Finally, we discuss conceptual and methodological problems and explore the potential for using community assessment scales to help citizens identify community development goals.

TYPES OF SCALES

The three categories we developed to delineate different types of community assessment scales were: (a) Urban Planning Scales, which focused primarily on the physical and ecological aspects of the community; (b) Intergroup Relations Scales, which focused on class, status, and suburban/urban differences; and (c) Social Institutions and Social Milieu Scales, which focused on attitudes toward various community institutions and aspects of community spirit, cohesion, and commitment.

A. Urban Planning Scales

1. Purpose/Orientation

A majority of the available community assessment scales were developed in the context of the urban planning process. This should hardly be surprising. The urban renewal/redevelopment process, whether in the form of developing new communities or in renovating existing communities, necessarily involves the question of how residents, or potential residents, perceive that community.

Physical planners have not always made this affirmation, however. The struggle within the profession is whether the planners know better than the residents what factors contribute most to community cohesion and to the happiness of its residents. Neighborhood residents have often rejected the concepts and priorities of the planners. As Lansing and Marans (14) observed,

"widespread resistance to planning proposals, parti-
cularly urban renewal projects, seems to indicate that
citizens and planners disagree over what a high qual-
ity environment may be." Evidently planners have been
slow to accept Mel Ravitz's (22) statement of twenty
years ago, that "increasingly, physical planners are
coming to recognize that to be effective sound physi-
cal planning must be related to the accepted wants and
needs of neighborhood residents." Thus community
assessment scales serve as a means of narrowing the
social and cultural gap between the "experts" and the
residents.

Some specific examples of the research in this cate-
gory will illustrate the diversity of purposes.
Lansing, Marans, and Zehner (14, 15, 25) undertook a
comparative study of planned new towns and unplanned
suburban communities. Zehner (25) explained that the
project was undertaken "to see if differential satis-
factions were related to identifiable aspects of the
environment that would be amenable to manipulation by
planners." This particular group of studies measured
the attitudes of residents who were either contem-
plating, or had recently made, a major change in resi-
dential location. Thus, it involved a conscious choice
between alternative communities.

The Booth (3) study of "Metropolitics" in Nashville,
Tennessee involves a somewhat different planning
issue: the adoption of a unified governmental struc-
ture for the entire metropolitan region. The author
sought to identify sources of resistance to the metro-
politan plan. Metropolitan consolidation, it should
be noted, has long been an important issue for urban
planning.

The Lansing and Hendricks (13) study arose from an
attempt to develop a comprehensive transportation and
land use policy for the Detroit metropolitan region.
The authors sought "to provide planners -- and politi-
cal decision makers -- with information needed to
develop workable plans which are consistent with the
needs and desires of the citizens and with their
patterns of behavior."

Ravitz (22) reported on two surveys used in neighbor-
hood planning. One of the studies concerned a neigh-
borhood where a conservation and preservation project
was underway. It sought to determine what aspects of
the neighborhood the residents were most and least
satisfied with, in order to establish priorities for
the project.

These illustrations demonstrate the diversity of pur-
poses for community assessment scales used in urban
planning. Their focus is similar, however. They tend
to emphasize the physical and ecological aspects of
community. They concentrate on attitudes toward the
type and availability of housing and the travel time
between residences, workplaces, and shopping areas.
These issues reflect the traditional orientation of
urban planners on the more manipulable physical char-
acteristics of community rather than the more elusive
social aspects.

2. Content of the Scales

As previously mentioned, many of the scales used in
studies we found cited are either not published at all
or would be difficult to obtain. For example, Ravitz
(22) discusses two studies, neither of which is avail-
able in an easily accessible form. Thus we have selec-
ted for illustration of the content of urban planning
scales, three of the scales that were discussed in
some detail in a book or journal article.

Lamanna (12) developed one of the most elaborate scales
in his study of value consensus. He included thirteen
items, divided between the general categories of
Physical Values and Social Values. Physical Values
included: Accessibility (distance to schools and
shopping centers); Amenity (the number of parks,
quietness of the neighborhood); and, Mobility (the
quality of sidewalks, roads, etc.). Social Values
included: Status (socio-economic level of the popu-
lation and the image of the community vis-a-vis other
communities); Autonomy (the ability to be oneself and

to be free from the scrutiny of others); Sociability
(the friendliness of people and the proximity of
friends); and, Heterogeneity (the diversity of the
resident population).

Lamanna sought to discover the relative importance of
the various aspects of community life in the overall
assessment of the community. He found that "con-
siderably more importance is placed upon the social
values than upon the physical values." The Lamanna
scale did not measure attitudes toward the physical
appearance of the community, the quality of social
services, or the degree of participation in community
institutions.

Lansing and Marans (14) defined "neighborhood quality"
in terms of the Physical, the Social, and the Symbolic.
Physical aspects included housing style, landscaping
and the proximity of services. Social aspects inclu-
ded the friendliness of neighbors and the ethno-reli-
gious-economic composition of the population. The
Symbolic aspect dealt with community's sense of iden-
tity and its prestige relative to other communities.
The authors did not publish their scale, but it appears
that most of the items dealt with the physical aspects
of the neighborhood.

The Lansing and Marans study included a comparison of
ratings by community residents and professional
planners. Significantly, they found only a moderate
degree of agreement (bivariate correlation coefficient,
($r = .35$) and indicated that social factors were more
important to residents than to planners.

Booth (3), in his study of metropolitanization, pre-
sented respondents with a list of eight "values" and
asked them to list the three which would be most
important to them in choosing a place to live. The
items, ranked by the number of times mentioned by
respondents, were:

   Desirable and healthy neighborhood in which to
     raise children

Better property values for the money
Closeness to big stores, to work and to profes-
  sional services
Good municipal services, e.g., sewers, sidewalks,
  police and firemen
Less politics, less red tape and less corruption
  in public offices
Lower taxes
Opportunity for civic participation
Fashionable and stylish neighborhood

B. Intergroup Relations Scales

1. Purpose/Orientation

Several studies focused on the relations, or perceived
relations, between different groups within communities.
Implicit in these studies is the effort to resolve
differences and promote community integration.

A number of studies in this group are concerned with
questions of class and status. Bauman (2), for exam-
ple, investigated the relationship between status
inconsistency and community satisfaction, operating on
the premise that "persons with inconsistent statuses
are more likely to experience dissatisfaction with the
community than persons with consistent statuses."
Hetzler (11) focused on the relationship between social
mobility and the political outlook of residents, while
Durana and Eckart (6) investigated the effect of social
rank on community attitudes.

Another group of studies within this category investi-
gate issues related to suburbanization. Morgan (19)
studied the relationship between social rank and atti-
tudes toward suburbanization, while Munson (19) inves-
tigated the question of why certain residents chose to
live in the suburbs rather than the inner city. The
Morgan and Munson studies resemble the urban planning
studies in that they focus on the choice between alter-
native communities; however, the primary concern in
the Morgan and Munson studies was the absence of

social integration on the metropolitan level. Munson
made his problem/policy orientation explicit: he
sought to "facilitate the proper focus of attention of
city planners in their efforts to cope with the exodus-
from-the-city movement." Morgan sought to promote
community integration by aiding "those in policy-
making positions who are searching for ways to close
the gap between suburbia and the central city."

The inner city-suburb studies, which arise from a
concern over the absence of community integration,
raise an important methodological problem for all
community assessment efforts: the problem of defining
ecologically what one means by "community." We shall
return to this question later.

2. Content of the Scales

The studies by Bauman, Munson and Morgan utilized
relatively unsophisticated attitude scales. Bauman
(2), for example, asked "considering everything, would
you say you are satisfied or dissatisfied with this
city as a place to live?" Respondents indicated their
attitude on a five-point likert-type scale. Munson
(20) utilized open-ended questions on such subjects as:
the "most-liked" and the "most-disliked" features of
the community; reasons for moving to the present loca-
tion; the attributes of the "good neighborhood" and
the "bad neighborhood," and so on. Morgan (19) began
by asking "what do you like about living in (a
suburb)?" and "are there any reasons in particular
why you might not want to live in Oklahoma City?" He
then followed these general questions with a series of
questions about attitudes toward more specific issues.

Several studies attempted to measure the respondent's
"satisfaction" with the community. Hetzler (11), for
example, used four scales measuring satisfaction with
the town, satisfaction with the general economic
opportunities within the city, satisfaction with the
city's industries, and satisfaction with the city's
government. The author's published article, however,
does not describe the specific content of the scale

items; nor does he define precisely what is meant by the term "satisfaction."

C. Social Institutions and Social Milieu Scales

1. Purpose/Orientation

A large body of literature exists which measure attitudes toward particular community institutions such as schools, the police, etc. While these studies are not the concern of this review, a few do include attempts to measure the attitude of residents toward the community as a whole.

In one of the earliest attitude scales developed, Bosworth (4) sought to measure "progressive" and "unprogressive" political attitudes with reference to specific community policy issues. His scale includes a number of questions designed to measure the respondent's attitude toward the community as a whole. Fessler (7), meanwhile, sought to measure the degree of community solidarity and the extent to which that was expressed in institutionalized behavior (in this instance, farmer cooperatives). This study also measured the respondent's assessment of community institutions in general. The New York State Citizen's Council (21) in 1952 developed an extremely simple rating schedule designed to assess the perceived needs of the community. The ABT Associates (1) included four questions concerning the community as a whole in their attitude survey related to the Small Schools Project in Rural Areas.

These scales also tend to focus on the degree of participation in the community institutions and on factors such as community spirit and interpersonal relationships. Thus, like the intergroup relations category, they are concerned with the issue of community integration and cohesion, but without the assumption of specific types of group differences and without the specific goal of resolving these differences.

2. Content of Scales

Bosworth (4) divided sixty items among three sub-
scales: Community Services; Community Integration;
and Civic Responsibility. His scale emphasized par-
ticipation and receipt of services. Using a likert-
type scale, he asked interviewees to respond to
statements such as "communities have too many youth
programs," and "a progressive community must provide
adequate parking facilities."

Fessler (7) divided forty items among eight major
areas of community life: community spirit, inter-
personal relations, family responsibility toward the
community, schools, churches, economic behavior,
local government, and tension areas. Using a likert-
type scale, respondents were asked to assess the degree
to which individual statements accurately described
their community.

The New York State Citizen's Council (21) scale con-
sisted of ten items, each focused on a different insti-
tutional area of community life: education, housing
and planning, religion, equality of opportunity, eco-
nomic development, cultural opportunities, recreation,
health and welfare, government, and community organi-
zation. The scale was published as a recommended tool
by the Citizen's Council and there is no published
research that utilized this scale.

The scale developed by the ABT Associates (1) con-
tained four questions, arranged in a logical progres-
sion. It asked respondents to indicate: 1) how
important they considered different areas of community
life; 2) the degree to which they participated in the
operations of these different areas; 3) how satisfied
they were with the services they received; and 4)
whether or not they felt they had an equal opportunity
to receive benefits and services. Each of the items
asked the interviewee to respond on a likert-type
scale to fifteen different aspects of community life:
schools, jobs, public welfare, local government, health
services, environmental protection, housing, economic

institutions, social services, communications, media,
transportation, criminal justice systems, recreation,
churches, and family life.

THE RUSSELL SAGE STUDY

Before turning to methodological problems, we must discuss
briefly a very thorough and comprehensive study of how
people feel about the quality of their lives. The Russell
Sage Foundation supported research by Angus Campbell,
Philip Converse, and Willard Rodgers, all affiliated with
the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.
Their book, The Quality of American Life: Perceptions,
Evaluations and Satisfactions (5), includes the complete
45 page questionnaire that was used to gather the data.
They were concerned about people's "sense of well-being."

The questionnaire, as well as the organization of the book,
reflects their division of this sense of well-being into
several "domains": residential environment, the nation,
work, marriage and family life, and personal resources and
personal competence. Each domain includes several aspects
of personal and community life. For example, residential
environment included questions on housing, public insti-
tutions and services, and climate. Personal resources and
personal competence included money, education, occupa-
tional status, physical fitness, social support and affec-
tion, intelligence, and command of goods and services.

It might be said that the residential environment questions
constituted a community assessment scale. However, the
authors make clear the interdependency of the various
domains, which suggests that the concept of a community
assessment scale needs to take these other domains into
consideration in trying to determine how people feel about
a community and what they want in a community. The lengthy
questionnaire would be difficult to use in community
development or planning activities, but it represents a
major step forward in the development of a usable scale--
and includes an extensive discussion of the theoretical
foundation for the scale.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

There are several methodological problems with the community assessments scales that we have described. One of the most crucial problems is that "community" is not clearly defined in most of the scales--nor are clear distinctions drawn between "neighborhoods" and "communities". Consequently respondents may answer questions with one concept in mind while the researcher had quite another. Also, this lack of definitional clarity makes comparisons among research studies virtually meaningless. Researchers who propose to undertake future assessment must be cognizant of this problem and give attention to the discriminatory power of their survey instruments.

Similar vagueness and multiple meanings are present in the use of the term "satisfaction." Some scales define it fairly specifically, for example, as effective participation in specific organizations or as receipt of particular services. Other studies define satisfaction in terms of personal perceptions and feelings, sometimes related to specific aspects of the community such as housing, parks, streets, et., and other times related in more abstract notions such as safety and community spirit. Precision in the definition of "satisfaction" is important both to the clarity of the findings and to intra-study comparisons.

Durand and Eckart's article (6) raises two other methodological problems of note. One is the problem of self-selection. They argue that "most people probably select neighborhoods for residence which they expect will maximize their satisfaction with life in the community." Consequently it is difficult to get a full picture of the impact of a particular ecological context upon residents. Those who would definitely not like a particular location choose not to live there.

One problem of Durand and Eckart's discussion of self-selection is that it assumes that all people have the resources to make effective choices. We know that this is not the case and many people are forced to accept less satisfactory (or unsatisfactory) alternatives may not express their real desires.

The other methodological problem raised by Durand and
Eckart is the static quality of most of the research.
Since the data is usually based on information gathered in
a single point in time, the measures fail to take into
account the affects of the dynamic impact of either long-
term changes in the neighborhood structure and composition
or temporary distortions of attitudes caused by dramatic
episodes.

Finally, there is the problem common to all studies based
on attitude tests, namely the uncertainty about the extent
to which expressed attitudes are translated into overt
behavior. The studies by Lansing, Marans, and Zehner (14,
15, 25) have the advantage of being aimed at people who
had just undergone or were about to undergo a change in
residence, so they were testing attitudes that had or
would actually shape behavior in residential choices.

                THEORETICAL PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL

The theoretical problems with community assessment scales
are much more serious than the methodological ones, in
that they raise questions about the basic assumptions of
the studies. Most of the scales do not explore basic
value issues such as those presented by Warren (23). Nor
are the items clearly derived from value options so that
citizens can express preferences which indirectly reflect
alternative value choices. In fact, there is little evi-
dence that the researchers have conceived of the scales
as tools for building theory related to concepts of a
"good community." The concept of the "good community"
could then be used to evaluate various policy options
which will either reinforce or diminish the realization of
those values, to organize citizens to press for changes
that will move the community toward its ideal.

It is unlikely that community assessment scales will serve
this function, however, as long as they continue to be
used simply to test community response to (or to justify)
specific program and policy proposals. Community devel-
opers and others with interest in the broader issues of

what constitutes a "good community" will need to take
leadership in the design and use of these potentially
useful barometers of citizen values and ideals. Proper
use of community assessment scales could serve to establish
the goals for community developers.

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