

## **Neighborhood from the Ground Up: Improved Methods for Understanding Community Togetherness and Mapping Resident-Perceived Neighborhoods**

Alex McCullough, MS Candidate, Agroecology Program, University of Wisconsin-Madison

[https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/armccullough/web/thesis/agroe\\_thesis\\_2012\\_printed\\_12.13.2012.pdf](https://mywebspace.wisc.edu/armccullough/web/thesis/agroe_thesis_2012_printed_12.13.2012.pdf)

### **1.1 Abstract**

“Neighborhood” — as a concept, an image, a boundary, an immediate physical reality — means different things to different people. Yet despite the flimsiness of the term, the way that we define the boundaries of a neighborhood can profoundly affect the way that we understand, interact with, or, in the case of community organizers and development projects, the way we serve that neighborhood. In this paper, we introduce and implement a method to identify an area’s neighborhood boundaries as the residents themselves perceive them. We developed this first and foremost as a guide for community organizers to replicate in their own work. Organizers and community development projects have many reasons to need to know about resident perceptions: to develop effective and relevant in-house programs, to accurately target outreach and community organization efforts, to understand the varied specific needs of each part of the community, and to track changes in the community over time. We demonstrate our method with a case study: the community around the Resilience Neighborhood Center and Badger Rock Middle School (RNC/BRMS) project. The study uses data from a simple community mapping exercise administered to the RNC/BRMS area in 2011. We use GIS tools to visualize and explore the data, propose new resident-perceived neighborhood boundaries, and test those boundaries in a systematic, quantitative manner. Every step is documented in detail for the benefit of readers wishing to implement the method. The final results of our case study serve as baseline data and recommendations for the RNC/BRMS project as it begins its first year of operations.

### **2.1 Abstract**

The Resilience Neighborhood Center and Badger Rock Middle School projects have as their main goal to evolve “resilient” communities in their area of south Madison. Central to the concept of community resiliency is the need for strong interpersonal ties or solidarity among community members. Bell proposed a model for understanding such connections in terms of a dynamic exchange between a “solidarity of interests” and “solidarity of sentiments” (Bell 1998). In this paper, we attempt to reformulate Bell’s “dialogue of solidarities” theory into a practical tool for community development leaders to use in their efforts to strengthen solidarity through community action. We build on Bell’s model using the RNC/BRMS neighborhoods as a case study and guide. We begin by introducing simplified terminology for Bell’s theory, replacing “dialogue of solidarities” with the conceptually clearer term, community “*Togetherness*.” Then, using data collected from a 2011 survey of households in the RNC/BRMS area, we present, refine, and validate a new set of questionnaire items built to

measure *Togetherness* as a binary composition of interests and sentiments. The new *Togetherness* Scale is used to search the full dataset from the 2011 survey for useful indicators of community *Togetherness*. Finally, we introduce a dynamic visual “road map” or “topography” of *Togetherness* and explore how we can use it to characterize a community, to understand the reasons behind a community’s improvement or degradation, and, most importantly, to devise strategies to move a community toward a condition of *Togetherness* characterized by strong interpersonal ties built on both shared interests and shared sentiments.

The introduction to the second section provides additional context and places this work in the developing field of measuring the essential elements of community and activities that foster or degrade it:

In a neighborhood in the south of Madison, a patch of urban blight is being reinvented as the Resilience Neighborhood Center and Badger Rock Middle School (RNC/BRMS), a progressive, two-headed project whose unifying goal is to make its local communities more “resilient.” A resilient community is one that has the physical, economic, ecological, and human capacity to bounce back from trying times. And central to its ability to pull all of these resources together in the face of adversity are the social ties and solidarity that bind its residents together. Those ties are the focus of our paper.

Discussions in sociological circles about the ties that bring — and keep — individuals together have long been dominated by language that focuses uniquely on either rational self-interest or on emotional connections. Bell proposed a model for understanding community attachment, instead, in terms of a dynamic interplay between the two: that is, between complementary self-interest and interest in the success of others (Bell 1998), or, in other words, between a “solidarity of interests” and a “solidarity of sentiments.” The two solidarities are shown to be in dialogue, with each reinforcing the other over the course of time.

Though heretofore conceived of in a mostly academic and esoteric sense, the “dialogue of solidarities” theory holds promise as a useful guide for practical work in community development. In this paper we introduce three tools for putting the dialogue of solidarities theory to work, so to speak. We begin by introducing the term “togetherness” as a substitute for the “dialogue of solidarities,” with the hope of recasting it in way that will help us speak of solidarity as an “instantaneous” quality of a community as well as a dialogic process that develops over time. Then, we build on Bell’s model using the neighborhoods around the Resilience Neighborhood Center and Badger Rock Middle school as a case study and guide. With data collected from a 2011 survey of households in the RNC/BRMS community, we develop a new scale for measuring attachment as a snapshot or “crystallization” of a community’s shared interests and sentiments, and use its quantitative results to paint a rough picture of the nature of interpersonal attachment or togetherness at work in the RNC/BRMS community. We end by proposing a conceptual tool for visualizing the dynamics of togetherness in more concrete terms. *It is our hope that this tool will help us measure and characterize community togetherness in an intuitive, evocative, and convincing manner, better understand why togetherness grows and atrophies, predict change in togetherness over time, and more effectively facilitate community solidarity through intentional community action.* (Emphasis supplied)

**Contact:** Marcia Caton Campbell, Executive Director, [marcia.catoncampbell@resilientcities.org](mailto:marcia.catoncampbell@resilientcities.org)