

Interactive comment on “Community development and social actor theories: a case study in Montréal (Canada)” by G. Sénécal

Anonymous Referee #1

Received and published: 23 March 2012

Overview of the paper

This paper introduces an analytical framework taken from a range of sociological theories that use the idea of actor and applies this to a case study in the Villeray district of Montréal. The literature review is synthesised into two tables that form the analytical framework. The first identifies different types of actor, their practices and community scenes. The second, developed through a tinkering methodology is a summary of the functions of actors according to different scenes, effects and the consequent data produced. A case study is presented which shows how multiple social actors form alliances in different settings to produce an action plan for the local community.

General comment

C14

The paper aims to do three things: to review theories, to define an analytical framework and by applying this to a particular case study, to gain insights into the processes of community development. The fundamental problem with the paper is the disconnect between the theoretical discussion and the case study. This disconnect leaves the reader struggling to see how the analytical framework has been applied to the case. The potential value of the paper lies in the case study and the way it highlights the processes that bind the ‘multi-type actors’ on ‘multiple scenes’ (paper, p 76, l 11 and l 13). Unfortunately these are only suggested via the case study which is mostly descriptive. The very short discussion and final remarks do not adequately deliver on the aims of the paper. Although territories and neighbourhoods are mentioned, the paper lacks a real sense of the social geography of the actors in this specific context.

Recommendations

The paper’s potential contribution might be better realised with a restructuring of the paper to foreground the case study and refocus the theoretical discussion in service of the analytical framework. The case needs to be made for the analytical framework, in the context of community development, outlining the problems it solves in relation to analysing social actors, the processes of social action and their effects. The ‘level of ambiguity surrounding collective action’ (paper, p 63, l 15) could be clarified by some examples from recent research. Community development research is highlighted in the abstract but is not mentioned in the main text and so the actual context of the paper is not adequately set out for the reader. The aims and purposes of the paper would be better outlined in the introduction and not distributed throughout the first two sections. By re-focusing on the case study, the paper could make more of the geography of social actors which currently has not been sufficiently addressed.

The theoretical discussion while interesting and useful with regards to introducing the reader to the many schools of thought surrounding social actor theories is rather long and technical. Table 1, outlining the actor categories and community scenes, is introduced at the start of section 2 but is not mentioned again throughout this section. The

C15

author establishes the difference between the different theories but not how this creates problems within the specific context of analysing community development. With this focus in mind, this section could be shortened and the analytical framework better integrated into the discussion. The same is true of Table 2, which is not very well integrated into the methodology section or in relation to the case study, where it is not mentioned.

The case study is described and then summarised without any clear connection to the analytical framework which seems to have been abandoned until the final paragraph. Table 3, summarising the scenes of the Villeray Forum Social, provides a lot of extra material but is not integrated into the main text and the terms used do not follow the analytical framework. The different type actors could be identified rather than the more general summary of, for example, 'citizens and local stakeholders' (paper, p 81, Table 3). The suggestion in the final discussion, that this case 'may be seen as a harbinger of a utopian community social movement' (paper, p 76, l 3) seems rather far-fetched. Throughout the paper issues of power are not developed. The failure of the Forum Social to distribute the manifesto is seen as demonstrating 'the limits of partnership' (paper, p 75, l 23) which rather glosses over the issue.

In summary, this paper has the potential to be a very interesting case study. The analytical framework which has been developed through a tinkering methodology could also contribute to a more intuitive understanding of social actor theories. However, this would depend on the argument being made as to what problem this solves in the context of community development and a much clearer discussion of the insights which have been gained by its use in the case study.

Technical corrections

P62 line 5, P63 line 15, P65 line 1- use of 'we' - unsure who this refers to.

P65 Line 29 – 'popularized' change to popularize

C16

P76 Line 2 – 'live' change to life

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 8, 61, 2012.

C17