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## Pathways for Equity in Development: Exploring the Past and Informing the Future through the Rural Social Sciences

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### Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to acknowledge the input and guidance offered by the previous presidents of the Southern Rural Sociological Society and the managing editor of the Journal of Rural Social Sciences. Any mistakes, however, are the author's own.

# Pathways for Equity in Development: Exploring the Past and Informing the Future through the Rural Social Sciences

John J. Green  
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## ABSTRACT

In reflecting on the fiftieth anniversary of the Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) and planning for the next fifty years, this SRSA Presidential Address focuses on development. Rural social scientists have the potential to contribute to the pursuit of greater equity in development, and examples are shared from applied research experience in Mississippi.

## KEYWORDS

Applied research; community-based; equity; rural development; rural sociology

In celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA), we have been reflecting on the past, evaluating our current position, and looking to the future.<sup>1</sup> Fifty itself is not especially noteworthy – we could be celebrating 49 or 51 – other than it neatly marks a time period and signifies that as an organization we have collectively been around long enough to sometimes forget where we came from. Additionally, in working across this timespan, we have developed the ability to change and sustain in a broader environment of, in development terms, short-term shocks and long-term stressors. We have survived tough times as a field, and have made numerous contributions to research, practice, and policy to improve people's wellbeing. However, just as we know from working in the realms of community, regional, national, and international development, it is one thing to survive and another to thrive.

I would like to use this occasion of the Presidential Address to share some ideas with you about how we might position ourselves as rural social scientists to both advance our field and contribute to improvements in quality of life for the people and communities we care about over the coming fifty years. In other words, how we might not only survive longer, but also thrive in helping people to confront barriers and pursue opportunities along pathways to development.

To start, I want to share a story with you to help frame my ideas around the intersection of population studies and community/regional development studies where I do most of my work.<sup>2</sup> I completed my MS degree in Sociology at Mississippi State University (MSU) and went on to complete a PhD in Rural Sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. While at MSU, I met a wonderful professor – Ralph Brown. He was a Missouri graduate who would join the faculty at Brigham Young University after his work in Mississippi and go on to become an influential Executive Director of the Rural Sociological Society. We formed a close mentorship bond, as he had also done with so many other students, including Albert Nylander who went from the PhD program at MSU to serve in multiple capacities at Delta State University and is now at the University of Mississippi (UM). When I joined the faculty at Delta State, the three of us would meet up to share meals and work on projects together, as Ralph continued to be involved in projects here in the South even after his move to Utah. One day at lunch, Ralph was telling about a variety of different projects he was working on, and they covered a dizzying array of substantive topics. I listened carefully as I was trying to learn how to balance a diverse set of projects through our Center for Community and Economic Development, feeling that I was being pulled in so many directions and was struggling to identify the theoretical and conceptual connections between them. This prompted me to ask Ralph how he managed to conduct research on so many different topics. He looked at me with that critical professor-to-student gaze and said he did not know what I was talking about. I repeated the list of projects he had just spoken about – including things like racial barriers in leadership networks in Mississippi, the impact of an automotive manufacturing plant in Alabama, and potential implications from the rise in motorcycle use in southeast Asia. Ralph’s reply was basically, and I am paraphrasing here, “Those are not different topics, but rather different cases. I study development and use these projects to do it.”

Of course, I know that development is a contested term, and as social scientists (many of us with critical perspectives), we like to argue

about the various and typically incongruous definitions of “development” (for example, see: McMichael 2010). Recognizing that development has different meanings and that various development projects and policies influence each other in complicated and often contradictory ways, I maintain that stripped to its core development is part of a very human pursuit to have a better quality of life. Between individuals, groups, and societies we may disagree about the specific forms and approaches to development (an important realm of investigation in itself), but there are common concerns, such as children doing better than their parents, increasing the education and skills of people to pursue their dreams, communities being able to provide the services that residents need, and people generally living healthier lives. From this perspective, all of us as social scientists have something to contribute to discussions and decisions around development, not just in terms of critique but also the shape and character of development practices and policies.

My next point is to emphasize an area of investigation where rural sociologists and other rural social scientists have theoretical frameworks, empirical methods, and analytical skills to contribute to development. That area is equity; we can focus attention on patterns of differential access to the resources that people need to thrive and identify strategies for overcoming these challenges. Because of our attention to class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age, and the intersections between them in relation to spatial location, we are equipped to help address the hard questions about which individuals, groups, and communities benefit and which pay in the face of development initiatives. We can also ask critical questions about where different groups start, given historic and geographic patterns of underdevelopment, what this means for their contemporary positions, and what they need to successfully participate in setting and pursuing their development goals. This is not easy work, as even defining equity is complicated. As Putnam-Walkerly and Russell state in a 2016 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, “The fact is that we don’t know what equity looks like as a society, because we’ve never actually had it.”

There are numerous theoretical and conceptual frameworks and approaches for this work, and social scientists from several fields and disciplines have made important contributions. For instance, the Livelihoods Approach (Chambers and Conway 1992; De Haan 2012; Van Dijk 2011), Community Capitals Framework (Emery and Flora 2006; Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2016; Gutierrez-Montes, Emery, and Fernandez-Baca 2009), and Community Resilience (Cafer, Green, and Goreham 2019a; Frankenberger et al. 2013) have all been used to inform development

practice and policy while also benefiting from testing and elaboration in the real world. And as these approaches and frameworks are elaborated and mature, scholars are addressing equity in more explicit terms. As a shameless advertisement, I want to recommend a special issue of *Community Development* that my close colleague Anne Cafer took the lead in guest editing along with Gary Goreham and myself. It integrates, synthesizes, and advances this literature on community resilience in important ways (Cafer, Green, and Goreham 2019b).

Additionally, we have rich, albeit complicated, traditions of both qualitative and quantitative methods, thus helping us to take on the difficult dimensions of quality of life that go beyond just human and financial capital, which are certainly important parts of development research, to also include social relationships, social infrastructures, satisfaction, and attachment. Excitingly, there have been major advances over the years in multi-method, community-based, and participatory research designs and methods, so we are informed by a vast array of insights that the limited methods of years past could not uncover. Many such achievements have been published in SRSA's own *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*.

I have spent much of my career, both as a student and as a faculty member and research director, conducting studies to inform community development and then using the studies to try and contribute, if only in modest ways, in advancing the field. With numerous partners, I have worked on projects, especially in the Delta and Gulf Coast regions of Mississippi, addressing local agrifood systems, health and health care, infrastructural needs, and development in the contexts of persistent poverty and the aftermath of disasters. Much of this work has benefitted from interaction with my colleagues in both SRSA and the Delta Directions Consortium. If I have made contributions to the field, I think they would be in the realms of applying the livelihoods approach in the U.S. South and building strategies for connecting community-based research and quantitative inquiry.

Development-focused rural social science is exciting in that we create knowledge and learn through reflective practice. I want to share two example projects that I have been involved with through the UM Center for Population Studies (CPS) where we are now seeing the benefits for informing broader social change efforts come to life.

The Right! From the Start initiative<sup>3</sup> focuses on the socioeconomic and place-based dimensions of poor birth outcomes such as preterm and low weight births. These problems are critical to babies' future health, and they also serve as important indicators of broader population health and

wellbeing. Knowing that having breastmilk is extremely helpful to low birthweight babies, the Initiative has also included efforts to connect urban-based hospital neonatal intensive care units with rural Delta-based community health centers to help support mothers wanting to provide breastmilk to babies that have been hospitalized for the complications of being born too small. Through this work, and to develop the program, we have analyzed vital records data to identify time trends and geographic patterns to birth outcomes, held community listening sessions using world café techniques, conducted interviews and focus groups with mothers at rural and urban clinics, and implemented an intervention program that involved tracking mothers and babies overtime. Spin-off collaborations are exploring clinical quality improvement opportunities as well as state and federal policy options to increase early access to prenatal care and postnatal support services. This effort involves nonprofit organizations, community health centers, a university hospital, and foundations. We are working to build, pilot, and revise models to help overcome challenges at the intersections of racial disparities, socioeconomic challenges, and spatial isolation.

The second example is the New Pathways to Health and Opportunity initiative<sup>4</sup> to address the combined challenges of limited economic opportunities, net outmigration, inadequate healthcare, and poor health outcomes in the Delta. Engaging with middle school, high school, and college students, nonprofit organizations are working together to introduce students to career opportunities, provide them with educational and training opportunities to pursue their aspirations, and engage them, their families, and other adults in community health research and action. They have taken on issues ranging from chronic lifestyle related health conditions to lead in drinking water, ever expanding their networks with other disciplines and professions along the way.

In both of these cases, and others like them, our Center for Population Studies is involved as a research, development, and evaluation partner. With our unique combination of housing the State Data Center of Mississippi and engaging in community-based research, our faculty, staff, and students partner with nonprofit organizations, local and state agencies, and foundations to utilize multi-method research to inform development. While I cannot discuss them here because of time constraints, our collaborations with Volunteer Mississippi for the Design with Data Initiative and both the MSU Social Science Research Center Mississippi and the Southern Rural Development Center for 2020 Census

research, outreach, and education are examples of what is possible in this movement.

These are just examples of our work through the CPS, and I know that we could go around the room at any meeting of the SRSA to learn of other compelling examples of innovative work being done. Collectively, through organizations like SRSA and our journal, we are making contributions to development dialogue, but what do we need to do as the next steps to amplify this work and help both our field and the communities we care about to thrive? I want to end by proposing and briefly elaborating on three modest proposals.

First, we must not rest on our laurels of better appreciating methods from across the qualitative-quantitative divide, and instead give more attention to multi-method and community-based research. For development work, this necessitates more integration between publicly available geographically aggregated data (vital records, censuses, and sample survey data), field-based methods (observation, interviews, and focus groups), and participatory engagement approaches. Together, we can describe characteristics and patterns, identify inequities, and evaluate efforts for community change that we can learn from and inform practice and policy, including governments and organizations.

Second, we need to do a much better job of systematically reviewing, integrating, and synthesizing population and development studies (including so-called gray literature and peer-reviewed publications) to broaden the scope of our work to account for what livelihoods development scholar De Haan (2012) noted of “endless variation” in development case studies. Through our writings, we need to engage with each other across places and scales and methods to build and continue to refine the state of our knowledge in more intentional ways. We also need to make this information more easily accessible by diverse publics, including those interested in policy, learning from the law and policy surveillance efforts taking root in public health (Burriss et al. 2016).

Third, we need to go beyond filing our reports with funding agencies, delivering presentations at disciplinary conferences, and submitting publications to academic journals. If we want to be more useful and relevant to our community partners and the policy process, we are going to have to package and disseminate our work to development practitioners, organizational leaders, and policy makers more broadly using new strategies. As part of this, we should be asking for input on how to effectively communicate our work to translate between the lived



experiences at the household and community levels and the more macro organizational and governmental policy levels.

As we move forward in discerning the next fifty years of rural social sciences in general and the Southern Rural Sociological Association in particular, I hope the thoughts I have shared here will be informative. With our rich grounded theoretical approaches and frameworks and diverse methods, we are certainly prepared for the next steps on the journey to help chart and build pathways for equity in development. We were reminded in the edited book on conversations between participatory development greats Horton and Freire that, “we make the road by walking” (1990, 3). Perhaps we can work together to use diverse perspectives to build multiple development pathways, all leading to greater equity.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I presented an earlier version of this commentary as my Presidential Address at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association in Birmingham, AL in February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> I originally shared this story in a remembrance panel in honor of the late Ralph Brown held at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society in Madison, Wisconsin in 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Right! From the Start includes Women and Children Health Initiatives, Aaron E. Henry Community Health Services Center, Delta Health Center, University of Mississippi Medical Center/Children’s Hospital, and the UM Center for Population Studies. The Community Foundation of Northwest is a partner, and the WK Kellogg Foundation provides funding.

<sup>4</sup> New Pathways to Health and Opportunity involves the Aaron E. Community Health Services Center, Mississippi Hospital Association Foundation, Tri-County Workforce Alliance, and UM Center for Population Studies. The Dreyfus Health Foundation of The Rogosin Institute is a partner, and the WK Kellogg Foundation provides partial funding.

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