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RURAL SOCIOLOGY RESEARCH IN THE LAND GRANT SETTING¹

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ABSTRACT A brief historical view of rural sociology as a discipline reveals an intense introspection--a preoccupation--with the role, identity, image, effectiveness, and contribution of rural sociologists and their research in the land grant setting. As one outside the discipline, the author examines the history of rural sociology and the current and/or perceived role of rural sociologists in Agricultural Experiment Station research. Finally, some perceptions are offered as to possible ways in which the discipline might improve overall effectiveness within the land grant community.

Introduction

My assignment is to address the current status and future of rural sociology research in the land grant or Agricultural Experiment Station setting as viewed by a director of agricultural research. Thus, there are many issues of interest to rural sociologists which are outside the scope of the paper. In particular, the interrelationships between rural sociologists and general sociologists--what they are or what one might think they should be--certainly are important to you and not unrelated to my topic. Yet this is outside my focus. Also, the role of the Economic Development Division of the Economic Research Service and of federal agencies with action or policy orientations, while related to rural sociology research in the land grant system, cannot be addressed in the brief time allotted. Essentially, I will give a brief historical sketch of rural sociology; lay out my own assessment of its current status, role, image, and effectiveness in research within our Agricultural Experiment Stations; and then turn to some ideas and possible actions which I believe would lead to the strengthening of the quality, contribution, image, and funding of rural sociology research.

It is well to state at the outset my own situation. As one of the few Experiment Station directors with a social sciences (agricultural economics) background, I likely have a better appreciation for the discipline than most directors. Having worked both in the Economic Research Service and in the U.S. Congress and having been directly

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concerned with policies, action programs, and funding of rural development programs from both the executive and legislative perspectives, my judgments have had ample opportunity for deep impressions--some favorable, some not so favorable--regarding rural sociology in general and rural sociology research in particular. Finally, my impressions of rural sociology research and its value and role have been favorably influenced by our own faculty and organizational configuration at the University of Arkansas. Though small in size, our rural sociology faculty is very effective. Faculty members are well integrated into the agricultural economics faculty, constituting the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. I hold a strong bias toward this particular combination--excellent faculty, fully integrated into a department with other social scientists, and often teaming up with scientists from other disciplines to address complex rural issues.

This assignment has been most enjoyable and rewarding for me personally. My past experiences and the reading (research) I did before writing this paper have firmly convinced me that (1) rural sociologists and their research are neither well understood nor fully utilized at most Agricultural Experiment Stations, (2) the full potential of the profession has not been realized and is on the verge of a tremendous upsurge in role, image, and productivity within the land grant setting, and (3) the key to realization of that potential is primarily in the hands of the profession.

Historical sketch

The beginnings of rural sociology might be traced to 18th century Europe and the birth of utilitarianism with its increasing concern with social forces impacting on man's general welfare. My impression is that seeds sown there gave rise to unrest with the status quo and to the spirit of adventure which led to, among other things, colonization of the North American continent. It might be argued that rural sociology really came into being on the American frontier and is another of our American inventions. The frontier value system, which put a premium on adventure, risk taking, the different and innovative, on land ownership, and on the pragmatic, coupled with an increasing concern for social conditions among the rapidly growing rural population, gave rise to such actions as the Morrill Act of 1862, Hatch Act of 1887, and Smith-Lever Act of 1914. True, these forces and specific legislative actions provided for much more than the birth of rural sociology--in fact, the entire land grant system as we know it today is based on these three acts of Congress. The points of significance to this discussion are that (1) the concerns of rural sociology as a discipline were forming during this era, making rural sociology an integral, substantive part of the land grant movement, philosophy, tradition, and system, and (2) the continuing primary emphasis of rural sociologists on pragmatic research was deeply set in this era.

The first funds the U.S. Congress provided specifically

for social research came with the Purnell Act of 1925, boosting the development of both agricultural economics and rural sociology as identifiable sets of issues for which specific research-academic-action disciplines developed. Charles Galpin's efforts from about 1915 and forward are generally regarded to be the first formally identified rural sociology efforts; thus, Galpin's niche in history as a father of rural sociology.

Social upheaval among America's rural people during World War I, the recovery during the 1920s, the Great Depression, and World War II provided the setting and national motivation for the solidifying of rural sociology as a discipline. The nation's emphasis on practical aspects of people problems in rural areas led many sociologists with university training to shift their attention from making sociology more "scientific" to making the discipline more "socially useful." The paradox is, I would argue, that this shift has also enhanced the "scientific quality" of the discipline in important respects, particularly in the area of assessment and measurement of social impacts.

The movement we now term rural sociology was, by the late 1930s, sufficiently established and sufficiently different from the discipline of sociology, with its greater emphasis on the theoretical aspects of social forces, that the Rural Sociological Society was established in 1937. Today, the Society has about 1,000 members. The discipline has now grown to include many other countries and an international association.

Primary issues of rural sociology research have shifted somewhat over time, indicating some propensity to adapt and to adjust to social changes in an effort to maintain relevance and productivity. Dillman and Hobbs (1982) sketch these changes briefly in the foreword to their book, **Rural Society in the U.S.: Issues for the 1980's**. Essentially, concerns before 1930 involved surveys of rural communities to identify problems relating to education, levels of living, the church, and social welfare among the rural population; from 1930 to 1950 the concerns were primarily depression- and war-related, including relief, recovery, adjustment of rural people, and demographic studies; from 1950 to the present more attention has been given to improving the well-being of farmers and rural citizens across a broader front, including adoption of technology, health care, social participation, demographics, use and preservation of natural resources, energy-related concerns and impacts, and environmental quality. As a matter of fact, the range of issues currently of explicit concern to rural sociologists is so exceedingly broad, complex, and all inclusive as to constitute a real problem for the discipline--a challenge which I address in the next two sections.

Current status

Concerns

An old cliché perhaps best sums up my perception of the current status of rural sociology research in the land grant setting:

"Things just aren't what they used to be;
In fact, I guess they really never were."

While I eventually will get on a more positive element, it seems to me that things have not been well and are not well with rural sociology as a discipline and with rural sociology research.

Why do I say this? Partly because of my own experiences and partly because of my earlier and recent reviews of rural sociology literature. There is a preoccupation with image, funding, and, to some extent, scope of relevant effort that so permeates the Journal as to be unhealthy. Being an agricultural economist, I can certainly appreciate your concerns with status, funding, and productivity. But I believe the degree of your concerns is such that it (1) signals (probably unduly) that the discipline is not in control of its destiny and (2) detracts or siphons off energies and talents that our society vitally needs in order to address the complex rural social issues confronting it. Presidential addresses published in the Journal for years have typically treated this concern with identity, often almost exclusively. And concerns expressed in the Journal and elsewhere are by no means limited to presidential addresses.

Typical of these expressions is Friedland's reference to the discipline's "relentless introspection" and his statement that the discipline's "capacity to change and to project a dynamic and vital probing of society do not deserve the same plaudits" as does its ability to self-analyze. He further states that "rural sociology occupies an anomalous and fundamentally untenable institutional situation" involving (1) uneasy relationships with general sociology and (2) its "irrelevance" to its institutional network, the land grant complex (1982:589, 594). Warner (1974:315) states, in reference to the lack of a coherent order within the discipline, that

...rural sociology needs perhaps most of all a great deal more codification and paradigm formation. We already now have much good research and an abundance of information, but lack a good deal in knowing what it all means. These needs are not new, but they are more urgent than ever as knowledge increases from individual research efforts. To accomplish this, new ways must be developed to fund activities of this sort.

This is not to suggest that the Journal does not effectively address real rural sociology issues--only to suggest that I

see too much repetitive soul searching.

Land grant administrators, Experiment Station directors in particular, generally do not understand and often, I think, misunderstand rural sociologists and their research. Either party logically can be faulted, but I submit that realistically the burden of proof is on the sociologist; thus, your concern and, thus, this paper. The administrators typically recognize the profession via an essential, powerful tool, the questionnaire survey instrument, as "the group that does the surveys." Often, this perception is expressed with a negative connotation, with little appreciation for the positive aspects of survey-type research information.

Paradoxically, another common perception among land grant administrators is that the discipline is more concerned with theoretical pontification, often excessively verbose, than with solving practical problems. Again, the sociologist is not alone at fault, yet this perception signals a need to at least communicate differently, and to take even stronger positive actions involving scope of issues addressed and method of approach to reaching solutions. As proof of this last point, I cite the relative paucity of funding for rural sociology research in the land grant system--significant levels, yes, but entirely insufficient to the task. The one exception is in the 1890 institutions where close to one-fifth of the total research effort has been in the area of rural sociology--yet where, in fact, there are few rural sociologists so that the work is often done by persons not trained in the field.

There are other dimensions to my assessment of the current status of rural sociology research and of how rural sociologists are perceived that are more nearly my own. While I feel that many other administrators would agree with one or more of these points, I cannot really say that they are points of general agreement among administration (not many points or issues would, in fact, meet this criterion!).

First, the discipline is spread too thin. For emphasis, let me restate that: The discipline has spread itself too thin. While most disciplines likely can be faulted on this point, I believe rural sociologists have tried to be all things to all people. This is not a realistic, productive approach. The two more recent books that address the role and scope of rural sociology research, by Copp (1964) and Dillman and Hobbs (1982), do a remarkable job of laying out a comprehensive list of research issues and concerns for rural sociologists. What is lacking is sufficient guidance on truncation, focus or priority setting, as I will discuss further in the next section.

According to Warner (1974:314):

The diversification and differentiation that have occurred among rural sociologists have further strained the capacity to generate enough critical mass for making substantial impact on the large problems needing attention. The number and resources of rural sociologists simply have not

kept pace with the expanding tasks and applications.

And again, on page 316, he states:

The challenge of a post-industrial age for persons interested in knowledge about rural society is not the lack of significant work to be done, but the overwhelming scope and complexity of the task before us. We have still to figure out the meaning and implications of what we think we know, as well as to verify it. There is not too little to do, but too much.

Second, rural sociologists still operate to a great extent as "a group unto themselves." There is attention given in the Journal and elsewhere to team efforts, interdisciplinary efforts, and the like, but even a cursory examination of published products of the profession reveals a preponderance of one-discipline output.

Third, as is true of all disciplines, rural sociologists find themselves amidst constant change and turmoil in the world and society in which they live. Constant change tends to feed the uncertainties among rural sociologists regarding their role, image, worth, productivity, etc. The definition and general consideration of "rurality" is a case in point. It seems to me that entirely too much attention is given to "rurality" in a defensive mode, and too little attention given to assessing quantitative and qualitative impacts of changes occurring relentlessly on the rural scene.

The fourth element of my assessment of the current situation is partially, though not entirely, an outgrowth or effect of the situation I see in the profession. I see tremendous lip service given to rural sociology issues in the political action-policy arena. The political convenience of "helping people in rural America" in an endless variety of ways has spawned many programs and promises. But the real dollar efforts are spread very thin, and are very small relative to the plans, promises, and fanfare--the difference I define as "lip service." Could it be that the frustrations within the profession are related to this phenomenon? I think so.

To repeat, these negative elements surrounding the current status of rural sociology research in the land grant system have impacted adversely upon funding levels. Nationally, rural sociology research in the Experiment Stations is funded at less than five percent of total funding. This is a fundamental factor in your current status. I believe the best way to change this deficiency is through the correction of other deficiencies already cited. This, however, relates to, and must draw upon, your strengths.

I promised earlier not to dwell exclusively on the negatives. There are several positive elements in my assessment of your current situation. For the rest of the paper I will discuss these strengths and ways in which they

can be used to work for constructive changes in rural sociology research, with consequent improvements in research products, action programs (eventually), image, status, funding, and the general sense of well-being among professional rural sociologists.

Strengths

The first strength is the presence of a well-established discipline with proven performance over a number of years. Research methodology and tools, data bases, theoretical foundations, and an established presence within the land grant setting are in place--a fundamental plus for the profession.

A related strength is the existence of a closely allied sociology profession with a primary concern for the theoretical and scientific bases for sociological study and research. This should be considered a very valuable asset to rural sociology research as a means of keeping the theoretical bases current and of increasing the total resource base committed to social issues research. Particularly if rural sociologists see fit to establish stronger alliances with sociologists on the more theoretical and basic issues and even on pragmatic issues of mutual interest, the presence of the sociologists could lead to a strengthening of rural sociology research.

Well-trained personnel throughout the land grant system, the Economic Research Service, other federal agencies, and private enterprise is a real asset. While numbers are not large in comparison to most other disciplines, I have observed that quality is excellent. In any research endeavor, strength in the personnel element is a primary requirement for improved quantity and quality of research output.

Funding for research efforts is in place, and so far as I can detect, relatively safe at current levels. This is a very significant asset--even a source of great envy among your counterparts in sociology. This strength, I believe, is subject to fairly immediate, substantive increase under conditions which are within the grasp of the profession.

Earlier, I cited the shotgun approach of rural sociologists as a concern, even a liability. But, therein lie the seeds of a real asset--the broad, heterogenous, diverse set of issues on the rural sociology research agenda signals a wealth of relevant, significant, even lucrative research issues. Those issues are, for the most part, of interest to the taxpayers of the country and amenable to analysis and to some control through policy based on that research.

An asset of particular significance is to be found in a specific aspect of your tools and the expertise of your membership. I term this asset "measurement skills," including nontechnical research design, that I observe to be very strong within the profession. The combination of skills in survey techniques, research design, and statistical analysis, and their special application to measurement of the "unobserved"--phenomena like well-being,

value of agricultural research, and quality of life--is a strength that can be marketed within the land grant setting. In fact, these skills are in demand almost anywhere in today's world. This asset can be parlayed into increased productivity and respect.

Rural sociologists' emphasis on the practical or empirical is also an asset, particularly for equitable treatment within Agricultural Experiment Stations. This asset relates to the one just discussed--there is an abundance of research issues within the domain of rural sociologists, all of which have a strong pragmatic dimension. This combination provides a very strong building block for the discipline.

I believe the variety, extent, and force of social change are in your favor as a research discipline. The human element is of increasing importance. As a society which has met its basic human needs, we are preoccupied with well-being as a pursuit or as an end worthy of pursuit. As an example of the current importance placed on well-being, I cite the recent CSRS-funded study of factors considered by high-technology firms looking for a place to locate (Buck et al., 1984). The study group found that of the top five factors considered by firms looking for a location, four directly involved quality of life.

Our research in the Agricultural Experiment Stations is increasingly of a multidisciplinary or team nature. This development, along with our increasing concern for the human element, bodes well for the rural sociologist who wants to be productively involved in Agricultural Experiment Station research.

Increasingly, we need to measure various phenomena--often social phenomena of interest to the rural sociologist. To measure or estimate the social impacts of numerous actions--even the impact of our agricultural research programs--is more and more essential in an accountability sense, as well as for input to the policy formulation process. This development begs attention from the rural sociologist, likely in conjunction with the agricultural economist and selected physical scientists in team efforts.

Finally, the current strong interest in international development, with such a heavy demand for sociological or human-oriented know-how to assess impacts and even to establish effective delivery methods, cries out for really effective involvement of the rural sociologist. This arena will, I believe, require the very best individuals from within your ranks to research and to transfer knowledge and technology consistent with the varied social parameters encountered.

Toward a strengthened role, product, and image

I sincerely believe the forces of circumstance and of change can enhance the future role, productivity, and image of rural sociologists within the land grant setting. To realize this improvement will require some change. At the

risk of appearing to be overly simplistic or to provide a "magic recipe for success," I wish to share some ideas I feel will prove useful to the future success of the discipline.

At the top of my list is the need to prioritize the relevant issues and select a few key research problems for immediate attention. I believe this would solidify research output in the critical areas, inspire confidence (on the part of directors and others) in your product, and lead to some inspiration within the discipline to replace the element of discouragement that is now evident. This will require the attention of some of your best talent.

A second suggestion is to increase visibility in the land grant system via team efforts--joint research with other disciplines. Selection of areas would be done, to some extent, in conjunction with the prioritizing. Three criteria for a high priority ranking as an area of work would be (1) the interest of other disciplines, (2) the interests of the rural sociologist, and (3) the likelihood of a significant contribution through the involvement of the rural sociologist. Larson (1959:9) suggests interdisciplinary efforts with economists, political scientists, and education researchers. I would add cooperation with agricultural scientists, particularly in studying impacts of changes affecting agriculture (labor, energy, human nutrition, well-being of rural people under various agricultural scenarios) and in assessing rates of adoption of new agricultural technology and/or ways to enhance adoption.

By careful thought you will be able to identify other areas where significant contributions can be made to agricultural research by rural sociologists. These actions will enhance funding of your research and call attention to your capabilities. I am not advocating a mass turning toward involvement in current agricultural research, but rather an initial selective involvement in areas where you see a high probability of success. Of course, involvement of the rural sociologist (as of any team member) early in the design and planning stages is critical. The inclination of other scientists is to involve the rural sociologist (or economist) as an afterthought, during the process of the study. Do not tolerate this; instead cultivate opportunities for early, total involvement.

A suggestion about which I feel very strongly is explicit use of your measurement skills, including nonexperimental design skills, in Experiment Station research. Team efforts would greatly benefit from your ability to measure changes in the well-being of people and other secondary effects deriving from some shock or change (such as a change in policy or the introduction of a new agricultural technology). Increasingly, we are recognizing the need to quantify such factors, which are very real and very important, yet difficult to measure. A specific suggestion is to team up with the agricultural economists and perhaps other disciplines to assess the value of our Experiment Station research--the changes in well-being of people and other benefits attributable to the adoption of

the whole array of Experiment Station research output. We simply have a lot to learn in this area and I really believe rural sociologists' involvement can (and hopefully will) make a significant difference.

The profession, I believe, should also look for additional opportunities for involvement in international development efforts. The complexity of these undertakings and the central people element involved in them cry out for the rural sociologists' involvement. And, these are usually well-funded efforts. The significance of these activities is great by most any standard--economic implications for the United States and for the developing country, the well-being of people, world peace dimensions, etc. There is much need to keep these international development efforts in the broader system context where the rural sociologists tend to be strong. This brief statement by Voth (1984:7) on major operational guidelines of the total Farming Systems Research approach to international (and even domestic) agricultural development illustrates my point:

Other major operational guidelines or assumptions (of Farming Systems Research) include multi-disciplinary teams of scientists working in an interdisciplinary manner--with emphasis upon actual on-farm involvement of these scientists; the holistic, systems perspective; the need for team members to have a sound base in disciplinary training, and for the team to be supported by sound disciplinary research; the focus upon meeting farm family objectives and goals, rather than goals and objectives imposed from without, either by researchers, commodity interests, or government planners; and farmer involvement in the entire process, including problem identification, technology selection, and evaluation.

A major contribution can (and must) be made to these efforts by the rural sociologist in determining the value systems of the people in the developing areas and how those values can best be considered and built into the entire development package--the "bottom up approach." This perception came to me very strongly early in life. My own family farmed in a relatively undeveloped, low-income area. Federal assistance programs of the New Deal era no doubt were of great help to my parents, but I vividly recall their negative views when decisions were made for them which they felt they could have made for themselves--simple things like patterns and designs of dishes and kitchen utensils.

This added involvement in international agricultural development perhaps runs a bit counter to my suggestion to truncate, inasmuch as I see little reference to international development in your recent research agendas (Dillman and Hobbs, 1982). But this area should be prioritized along with other areas, and I think a rational prioritizing of research areas would place international development in the upper range of the list in which rural sociologists can be productively involved.

You will want to be alert to opportunities for your research that are brought about by the rapid changes occurring in rural society--changes in age composition and geographic distribution of our population; changes in our resource base such as energy, labor and water; greater emphasis on well-being of people and its impact on societal and industry choices; changing community structure; changes in our perceptions of well-being; changes specifically surrounding agriculture; and changes carrying our society from a product orientation, through a service orientation, to an information orientation. To reemphasize, a common thread running through these changes is an increasing emphasis on the human element--on what constitutes well-being--the very area where rural sociologists "do their thing."

Cultivation of a greater or closer rapport with state and federal agencies involved in serving rural America makes sense to me, in terms of overlapping interest and expertise, in terms of your own emphasis on the pragmatic, and in terms of funding sources. Emphasis on policy--information feeding into policy formation, policy implementation and impacts of various policy alternatives--would be required. But my bias is that this emphasis needs to be strengthened anyway.

Given your current situation within the land grant system, you need to make some special, but rather simple, efforts to keep your Experiment Station director well informed of your work and its implications. Brief, simple summaries or highlights--carefully screened for relevance to his interests--are in order. As the bottom line, place a premium on generation and widespread dispersal of excellent, clearly stated products addressed to relevant issues. This is still the name of our game, and the individual, team or discipline who can excel in this respect will have a distinct advantage in establishing credentials and obtaining funding.

Conclusion

To briefly conclude, rural sociologists' image within the land grant community--even within the ranks of rural sociologists--is of some concern. This is not a situation of crisis, neither is it simply a recent phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the natural growth of a discipline in an arena in which that discipline traditionally has been seen as different and thus misunderstood. The situation is amenable to constructive change through concerted efforts from within. By building upon the strengths of the discipline and taking advantage of societal trends and changes leading toward greater concern for the human element and its well-being, rural sociology can become much more productive, recognized, utilized, and financially supported. I trust that this treatise will prove to be a catalyst to move your individual and collective actions toward a more cohesive, well-defined, mainstream discipline within the land grant setting.

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