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Bertrand: Rural Sociological Research in the South: An Historical Overview  
**RURAL SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE SOUTH:  
AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT** The history of rural sociological research in the South is examined in terms of eras: Early History, The Depression Years, the War Years, the Great Society, and the New Rural Sociology. Although following national patterns, southern rural sociological research has maintained a regional character, attuned to the unique problems of the region.

### **Introduction**

The stage for my brief discussion of the history of rural sociological research in the South will be set by a brief review of the emergence of Rural Sociology as a disciplinary specialty. Recognition of Rural Sociology as an independent discipline dates back to the turn of the century. The discipline owes its emergence to problems of rural life in the early 1900s that demanded national attention. It was natural that efforts should be made to understand and control the forces responsible for the plight of farmers and for the exodus of rural persons to towns and cities. Researchers undertaking this task were, in time, identified as rural sociologists. Accounts of the birth and rise of Rural Sociology have been recorded by several authors (Taylor et al. 1949; Brunner 1957; Smith 1957; Nelson 1969).

It is interesting to note, in the context of this paper, that the early history of Rural Sociology is pretty well limited to certain states located in the northern part of the nation. The first course in Rural Sociology was taught at the University of Chicago in 1894. The first course in an agricultural college was offered at Rhode Island Agricultural College in 1904. The first text in Rural Sociology, **Constructive Rural Sociology**, was published by John M. Gillette of North Dakota in 1913. The second text to appear, **Introduction to Rural Sociology**, was written by Paul L. Vogt of Ohio State University in 1917. The first department to be devoted to what is now considered Rural Sociology was established at Cornell University in 1918. It was called the Department of Rural Social Organization, a title reflecting the view that Rural Sociology was not a separate discipline but an application of sociology to the study of rural society. The name of the department was changed to Rural Sociology about 20 years later. A. R. Mann was the first head of the Department of Rural Social Organization at Cornell, but Dwight Sanderson, who followed Mann, is given credit for the growth and success of the department.

It should be noted that the roots of Rural Sociology

teaching and research are not in the state agricultural colleges. In fact, in the early 1900s the colleges of agriculture appeared to be quite apprehensive about the designation "sociology," even with the legitimizing "rural" as an adjective (Nelson 1969, pp. 32-37). Rural Sociology began in universities and colleges not a part of the Land Grant System. The two most notable institutions to pioneer in Rural Sociology teaching and research were the University of Chicago and Columbia University (Nelson 1969, p. 27).

Rural sociological research began to take definitive shape in the early 1900s. Research in the discipline was well underway by the end of what Brunner (1957, chapter 1) calls the "pre-Purnell period," i.e., before 1925 when the Purnell Act made research funds available to sociologists at state agricultural experiment stations. Perhaps the most influential research report during this period was the classic study, **The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community** (Galpin (1915). Some 10 years later, a bibliography of social surveys (published in 1927) cited 72 general rural community surveys, 54 rural education studies, 38 rural church studies, 23 rural child labor and welfare reports, and 6 cost of living investigations completed by rural sociologists (Brunner 1957, pp. 6-7).

The South participated to a considerable extent in the rural sociological research effort of the pre-Purnell Act period. This participation was mostly in the form of socio-economic studies made on a county basis. Five of these studies were made by researchers at the state Normal School in Athens, Georgia; 25 by researchers in the departments of rural social science at the universities of North and South Carolina; 20 by people at the University of Virginia, and an unknown number of studies done by researchers at universities in Texas and Tennessee (Brunner 1957, pp. 7-8). These first rural sociological studies in the South were prompted by the condition of serious poverty existing from 1910 to 1920. Brunner (1957) notes they were primarily statistical and descriptive and made no reference to sociological theory.

With the passage of the Purnell Act, rural sociological research began a rapid growth in the South. Leading this growth was North Carolina State College, under the leadership of Carl Taylor. Taylor came to North Carolina State in 1920 and established a great tradition in the dozen or so years he was there. Eugene C. Branson, a pioneer rural sociologist in his own right and head of the Department of Rural Economics at the University of North Carolina, had set the stage for rural sociological research in North Carolina. It was Branson who brought Howard Odum to North Carolina; Odum in turn hired Rupert Vance, Guy Johnson, and Margaret Hagood (among others) who did studies of rural populations. Carle Zimmerman joined Taylor at North Carolina State and the two of them collaborated on a study of the living conditions of 1,000 North Carolina rural families. This study received great publicity. After Taylor left North Carolina, Horace Hamilton and others carried on the tradition that had been established.

Although North Carolina was the acknowledged early leader in rural sociological research in the South, several other states were active in this respect. In Virginia, both the University of Virginia and Virginia Polytechnic Institute were noticeably involved in studies of rural people. At the University of Virginia, Wilson Gee headed a department known as the Rural Social Economics Department and maintained close ties with Charles Galpin, who had now moved from the University of Wisconsin to the USDA. Gee and his colleagues published several notable research reports. William S. Garnett came to V.P.I. to be the first chairman of Rural Sociology in 1925, later serving in a like capacity at Texas A&M. He collaborated with Horace Hamilton and others in publishing a number of research studies.

In the early 1930s, Louisiana State became known in rural sociological circles through the work of T. Lynn Smith and Fred C. Frey and their students. From 1920 to 1925 A. W. Hayes at Tulane University, had set the stage for rural sociological research in Louisiana with several community studies. O. D. Duncan pioneered in Rural Sociology at Oklahoma State University during this same time, as did B. O. Williams at the University of Georgia. Merton Oyler began doing rural sociological research at the University of Kentucky in the late 1920s. Howard Beers came to Kentucky in the late 1930s, and Irwin Sanders arrived there shortly thereafter. This was about the time Harold Kaufman moved to Mississippi State University, after serving a short stint at Kentucky.

There were and are many others who should be listed among the major contributors to rural sociological research in the South, but these were more or less the first to arrive on the scene. Since the 1940s, every state in the South has had rural sociologists who have made contributions to research. In 1986 all 13 Southern states were represented in the Directory of North American Institutions sponsoring Rural Sociological research.

### **Development eras of Rural Sociology research**

The research attention of rural sociologists in the United States has changed over the years. This is clearly an indication of the profession's sensitivity and response to major national issues and concerns at various periods of time. In this section, we identify the broad developmental eras of Rural Sociology and review the response of rural sociologists to the times in terms of research activity. The research of southern rural sociologists was never a mirror reflection of the research of rural sociologists in other regions, but trends and broad research areas were similar. The eras identified here were delineated in collaboration with Bill Falk, formerly at Louisiana State, now at Maryland.

#### **The Depression Years Era**

The Depression Era, insofar as American agriculture and

rural life was concerned, began shortly after World War I and continued until the beginning of World War II. This was the era when rural sociological research came into its own. The seriousness of the economic situation led to the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in May 1933. This opened wide the door of opportunity for rural sociologists, giving them research and policy roles they never had before.

One of the important divisions of the newly created FERA was the Division of Research and Statistics. Its first head was E. D. Tetreau. He was succeeded by Dwight Sanderson of Cornell University, a renowned rural sociologist. Sanderson was followed as head by two other prominent rural sociologists, J. H. Kolb and T. J. Woofter, Jr.

The division immediately began to recruit rural sociologists to serve as state supervisors of rural research under the FERA. These supervisors recruited research workers from the rolls of the Civil Works Administration (the early New Deal work-relief program) and began a series of regional and nation-wide studies that had a profound impact on national policy as well as on Rural Sociology as a discipline. Many of the rural sociologists recruited by Sanderson were from colleges and universities, and a number were from the South.

Among the earliest projects undertaken by the division were a survey of rural relief needs and a census of unemployment. These studies revealed that 1.5 million farm families were receiving relief. Rural sociologists in several states collaborated with relief administrators in the implementation of these and other studies. Altogether, 20 research monographs were completed and published between 1935 and 1940. Some of these studies were monumental in their contribution to the understanding of rural problems. Among these was **Six Rural Problem Areas: Relief-Resource-Rehabilitation** by P. G. Beck and M. C. Forester, (published as FERA Monograph No. 1). This study dramatically revealed the entire cotton South as a region with severe economic problems.

Other studies that received wide attention were A. R. Mangus's **Rural Regions of the United States** (1940), C. C. Zimmerman and Nathan L. Whetten's **Rural Families on Relief** (1938), T. J. Woofter et al., **Landlord and Tenant on the Cotton Plantation** (1936), C. E. Lively and Conrad Teauber's **Rural Migration in the United States** (1939), F. D. Cronin and Howard Beer's **Social Problems of the Drought Area** (1937), and C. P. Loomis's **Social Relationships and Institutions in Seven New Rural Communities** (1940). Much of the research reported in the above titles was done in the Southern Region. The publicity these studies received gave impetus to Rural Sociology as a discipline.

After 1936, the WPA (Works Progress Administration, an agency successor to the Civil Works Administration) did not sponsor nationwide or regional field surveys, although research activity was carried on at the state level with WPA support. Carl Taylor had become Chief of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare in 1937 (succeeding

Galpin), and immediately brought in bright young rural sociologists to do research for the division. Many of the studies had a southern setting. For example, E. A. Schuler's **Social Status and Farm Tenure--Attitudes and Social Conditions of Corn Belt and Cotton Belt Farmers** (1938) and Carl C. Taylor, Helen W. Wheeler, and E. L. Kirkpatrick's **Disadvantaged Classes in American Agriculture** (1938). Probably the most notable work sponsored by the division during the Depression Era was the **Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community** project. One of these six studies (Wynn 1943) was located in the South--Harmony, Georgia.

Research conducted by rural sociologists during the Depression Era exploded the myth that farming somehow protected people from poverty and other social problems. It also verified the existence of extreme diversity from one U.S. rural area to another. Among these were differences in levels of standards of living, differences in rural and urban demographic patterns and characteristics, and differences in patterns of rural and urban migration. Southern rural sociologists documented much of what we now know about rural poverty, rural relief, farm tenancy, farm labor, rural social stratification, rural-urban population characteristics, and rural-urban migration patterns.

#### The War Years Era

The second clearly recognizable era of rural sociological research began in 1941 when the United States became involved in World War II. This era, as we define it, lasted through the post-war period up to the late 1940s. During this span we again see how social forces gave direction to rural sociological research.

Olen Leonard (1944) provides insight into the impact of the War Years on the work of rural sociologists:

The Pearl Harbor tragedy and its concomitant developments have profoundly and perhaps permanently affected rural sociological research. Demands brought to bear upon personnel in rural sociology have probably been unique in the discipline's history.

Leonard (1944) goes on to note that special organizational and functional assignments had been given to certain federal agencies by congressional action or executive order. To illustrate the impact of these assignments on rural sociology, he points out how the Federal Extension Service was given the responsibility for initiating a project involving the organization of the entire U.S. rural population. The plan required the selection and training of some 1,000,000 local leaders. In his position as Head of the Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare, Carl Taylor was to make available members of his community organization staff "for any assistance they could give State Extension personnel." Rural sociologists in Land Grant colleges and universities, in the South as elsewhere, were likewise quickly recruited to do the needed research and

training for what came to be called the "Neighborhood Leadership Organization Program." Many federal war agencies became interested in the community organization research and activity being carried on by rural sociologists and solicited their help either directly or indirectly (Leonard 1944).

The sensitivity of Rural Sociology to the times is indicated by the appointment of a subcommittee on wartime research of the Committee on Research of the rural Sociological Society in early 1943. In the discharge of their duties, the members of the subcommittee found that the war had indeed caused a shift in the type of rural sociological research being conducted in agricultural experiment stations. The main change they saw was an increased emphasis on social organization, farm labor, and farm tenure studies. The number of population studies remained at the pre-war level, but studies of rural welfare, levels and standards of living, and social adjustment dropped in number (Mangus 1943). Sewell (1965) affirms that the greatest change the war and post-war years brought in rural sociological research was a shift in emphasis from rural social welfare problems and policy studies to a broader range of concerns, noting that labor and manpower studies were prominent during the war years but faded quickly thereafter.

All in all, the impact of the War Years Era on rural sociological research in the southern region and the rest of the nation is easy to detect. Attention immediately began to focus on strategies for organizing rural communities for action and on manpower and labor studies. Jehlik (1964) points out that a number of studies were of short duration and designed primarily for defense and administrative purposes.

### The Great Society Era

Our interpretation of the evolving times suggests that the War Years Era in rural sociological research development was followed by what we have called the Great Society Era, borrowing the designation from President Lyndon B. Johnson. This era roughly spans the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. It is marked by rather serious national attempts to improve agricultural programs and to deal with economic and demographic changes in rural areas. The era was formalized by the passage in 1954 of what came to be known as the Rural Development Program.

For more than 30 years, Purnell funds were the principal support for rural sociological research. Although these funds represented a large percentage of the total expenditures for rural sociology research, the share received by rural sociologists was limited. The passage of the Hatch Act, as amended in 1955, improved the situation for rural sociologists considerably. The Hatch Act incorporated all the provisions of the Purnell Act (and some other acts) that supported social science research. By 1957 the number of rural sociological research projects supported

by Federal grant funds had grown to 131--a considerable jump from the 65 projects supported in 1937. In 1964, a total of 324 projects, wholly or partially rural sociological, were on the active federally supported rolls.

These numbers show that rural sociological research activity gained impetus during the Great Society Era. This impetus was registered in the South as elsewhere. It was a direct result of an emphasis on rural development at the national congressional and administrative levels. This attention was inspired by the discovery that numbers of rural dwellers and numbers of farms were declining at rapid rates and that numerous technological innovations were impacting rural areas. The Great Society Era can be characterized as the time when rural sociologists seriously discovered social change. At the forefront of this discovery were the famous innovation and diffusion studies that became hallmarks of the discipline. No other discipline, as far as I can determine, has published as many articles dealing with the theoretical, descriptive, and analytical aspects of the acceptance and diffusion of innovations as has Rural Sociology (Bertrand 1958, Chapters 24-26). Scores of studies were done in an attempt to understand and promote community development. While the efforts devoted to research in community organization and leadership were most numerous, studies of community action and of the impact of rural industrialization also became popular. In fact, the maturing of the profession is seen in the broad range of studies designed to provide information on the economic, social, and psychological problems of rural areas. Examples are youth studies, studies of the aged, studies of the adjustment of in-migrants and out-migrants, studies of unmet health-care needs studies, and family and education studies. It should be noted that population studies remained popular during the Great Society Era, with emphasis on rural-urban comparisons of trends in composition, distribution, fertility, mortality, and migration. Southerners were in the middle of this research effort, as the voluminous literature produced during the Era testifies.

#### The New Rural Sociology Era

The New Rural Sociology Era, in our estimation, began in the early 1970s. Its chief hallmark is a noticeably serious attempt to make Rural Sociological research meaningful to intelligent decision making for the solution of current problems of rural America, with emphasis on farmers and farming. The Winter 1985 issue of **Rural Sociology** provides evidence of a general disciplinary recognition of this new research era. However, there is no better indicator of this new era than the last publication in the **Rural Studies Series** of the Rural Sociological Society (Dillman and Hobbs 1982). This volume includes 41 chapters dedicated to rural social problems in the United States. It is addressed to scholars, policy makers, and citizens and offers suggestions for research on the important issues identified. These



suggestions reflect the direction of rural sociological research today, in the South as well as nationally. A review of current projects listed by rural sociologists shows a continuing strong emphasis on people, on the community, on agriculture, and on natural resources and the environment. The new direction that the research is taking is indicated by projects with designations such as energy, appropriate technology, minorities, community services, crime, social impact assessment, the structure of agriculture, land use, fisheries, water, and natural resources use in their titles.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the direction of rural sociological research in the South has changed through the years. This change has followed national patterns while maintaining a regional character, more or less inspired by the unique problems of the region. Today the research of southern rural sociologists, along with that of their fellow professionals in the rest of the United States, is clearly tuned to the complex rural problems which face our society. It is our prediction that their contributions will make a great difference.

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