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## Creating Entrepreneurship in Rural Sociology<sup>1,2</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** Southern rural sociology finds itself at an important political, social, and economic juncture. Given present funding constraints, land grant university faculty working in rural sociology must assume a more entrepreneurial posture if the discipline is to survive the challenges that confront it. The emergence of the importance of policy analysis to the agenda of contemporary southern politics provides a "market window" for rural sociologists to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of rural sociology in the region and to the present and future quality of life in the South. This paper examines these issues and proposes an entrepreneurial model for the discipline.

### *Introduction and overview*

#### *Introspection and rural sociology*

I presume I can justifiably claim the distinction of being the only person in this room who has read the presidential addresses of all Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) and Rural Sociological Society (RSS) presidents, at least for the years I have copies of the respective journals. Preparing this address has required that I examine

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has benefitted greatly from the comments of Bo Beaulieu, Dick Schermerhorn, Susan Jenkins and Ron Wimberley. All mistakes and misunderstandings are attributed to the author. Presidential Address given at the Southern Rural Sociological Association Meetings, Ft. Worth, Texas, February, 4, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> The intangible rewards of being president of SRSA remind me a great deal of the folk medicines administered to me by my grandmother. The one in particular that comes to mind is the whiskey and honey concoction she gave me when I had a cough. I know that she, like the SRSA, had my best interests at heart and that the intention was that the "medicine" would be good for me, however, as it relates to medicines and presidential responsibilities, I can attest that it is the secondary effects that sneak up on you. The ominous specter of this presidential address has loomed over me for the past 12 months. I have contemplated numerous topics, all discarded before they were even begun, to choose what may be perceived as a cowardly (or shall we say applied, extension rural sociologists') way out. However, when one is faced with the grim reality of being professionally "pilloried" by colleagues, convenience is the better part of valor.

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the collective wisdom of my predecessors as to the issues most appropriate to rural sociology and southern rural sociology in particular.

Past presidents of SRSA and RSS have tended to go different directions in terms of themes of presidential addresses. SRSA presidents, perhaps because of what Ladewig (1986) has appropriately described as the "communality of the group," have been much more likely to examine substantive research and extension issues of direct relevance to their particular area of work, such as rural poverty, accountability and evaluation, funding for research in 1890 institutions, or rural development topics germane to the region. RSS presidents have taken as their theme either "macro" rural sociology issues, or introspective critiques of the discipline. RSS presidents have not been reticent in sparking intellectual debate within the discipline as to what the future might hold for rural sociology and rural sociologists. Perhaps the choice of topics goes with the territory, so to speak. However, I propose that the choice of introspective topics for presidential addresses, and the ensuing debate that emerges in the respective journals, has unanticipated consequences both inside and outside of rural sociology.

I am not deprecating introspective presidential addresses, the many journal articles that follow, or special issues of *The Rural Sociologist* (TRS) devoted to this theme. In fact, I rather enjoy them. They impart in me a renewed sense of professional vigor. An unintended side effect, if you will, is to challenge my ability to utilize my sociological imagination beyond the narrow constraints some would advise. I do suggest, however, that the messages these themes convey have generated unintended secondary effects, among colleagues inside and outside our land grant institutions, that propagate an impression of rural sociologists as suffering from the *pogo syndrome*. In short, we have met the enemy and it is us. Paradoxically, introspective themes question the role and relevance of rural sociology in colleges of agriculture and land grant universities. Quite honestly, reading them can convey the appearance of what one of my colleagues calls "intellectual whining" by rural sociologists. Perhaps more damning in my view is the likelihood of creating within our publics a mistaken perspective of disciplinary inertia among rural sociologists. Hildreth's (1985) comments to this group in 1985 were that many land grant administrators have the impression, if I may paraphrase, that rural

sociologists are disciplinary extroverts and practical problem introverts.

I understand and appreciate why rural sociologists feel the need to rhetorically bash the discipline and each other. That is part of our training as sociologists, to question institutional normative structures. As Christenson (1989) observed,

too often we expend time in self evaluation rather than turning a critical eye to the evaluation of the conditions of rural areas. We have something to say, we have a vision to operationalize, and we need to get on with it.

Yet, we do get on with it. Copp's (1989) eloquent rejoinder to those who question the pace or worth of our scholarship was "we are doing our thing, not obfuscating in a corner."

#### *An overview*

The title of my address, "Creating Entrepreneurship for Rural Sociology" emerges from a fundamental flaw in my character. The earlier contention that my choice of topic is analogous to taking the easy way out is a tongue in cheek jab at what Johnson (1984) labels as pragmatic chauvinism, an issue I will pursue later in this address. I also plead convenience as a justification for my choice of topic. In reality, I am much more myopic and mercenary in my intent. My choice of topic was somewhat generated by a remark Preston La Ferney made to this group on a cold, dark, day in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1985. His comment was that

the full potential of rural sociology has not been realized and is on the verge of a tremendous upsurge in role, image, and productivity within the land grant setting, *and, most importantly, the key to the realization of that potential is primarily in the hands of rural sociologists.*

Rural sociology's future in the hands of rural sociologists is a frightening thought. We have become most adept at discoursing on the practice and application of rural sociology only with other rural sociologists. For a discipline whose focus should be society, ours seems limited to our professional society and the narrow normative

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confines of our academic homes. We have been most reluctant to become entrepreneurial with our rural sociological skills. Entrepreneurship requires an ability and willingness to transfer our disciplinary knowledge and talents to issues that are relevant outside our professional and institutional normative structures. We do not trivialize our discipline or our scholarship by becoming entrepreneurial unless we define it as such. My assertion is that we cannot afford to miss the opportunities that a rural sociological entrepreneurship can provide us. That is my challenge in this address. I will identify the factors that have created a window of opportunity for entrepreneurship by rural sociologists and offer an area where our entrepreneurship can be both beneficial to scholarship within our discipline and to addressing issues of importance to the larger society of which we are all part.

*The present and future status of rural sociology*

*The situational context for rural sociology*

As rural sociologists in the south, we have come to an important crossroads. We stand at the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century. Technological capabilities allow us to massage data in ways never before imagined. Communication and video technologies provide us with instructional and research possibilities that boggle the mind. The South is a veritable gold mine of possibilities for studying socioeconomic growth and change. A revolution in world politics is putting new institutional arrangements in place and creating new social orders. Globalization of local economies is now a buzzword. Reapportionment stands to shift regional alliances and political agendas in the U.S. Environmentalism, food safety, animal welfare, and biotechnology loom as concerns that will reshape agriculture. Rural issues finally seem ready to find a place at the table with the other "sacred cows" in the Farm Bill. How will land grant universities, rural sociology departments, and rural sociologists respond to this dizzying array of issues?

It would appear that our plate is literally running over with opportunities. Given the present institutional structures in which most rural sociologists work, whether it be agricultural experiment stations, cooperative extension, or academic departments, and given the historically accepted role of rural sociology in these structures, generating what Newby (1982) has labelled as "farm and rural

community adjustment studies," can rural sociologists respond any differently? Perhaps more importantly, will we respond any differently than we ever have? Have we developed a sort of Pavlovian behavioral response to our institutional and disciplinary niche in life? After all, we can always hide behind the assumption of institutional business as usual on the part of our universities. However, I contend that we are confronted by a fundamentally different "market window" for rural sociology and rural sociologists at this particular time in our history. I suggest that these differences depart significantly from previous rural sociological history. Let me illustrate those differences.

*The market window for rural sociology*

The first presidential address to this organization was given by Rick Wetherill, a friend I truly miss at these meetings, in 1985. Rick took a prophetic tack in his presidential address. His forecast for rural sociology was on target and not much changed from today. Rick's observation follows:

From my perspective in Washington, the near future looks grim. Budget cuts and rumors of budget cuts fill the air. This has never been a good sign for the prosperity of rural sociology.

If we do not develop a spirit of entrepreneurship, I fear for our continued fiscal well-being.

Obviously, I do appreciate Rick's way with words as you can see by the title of my address. Rick was correct in his assessment. Things did not improve very much for rural sociology during the Reagan years and improvements have not been forthcoming under the Bush Administration. "So what?" you say. Funding for rural sociology and the social sciences has never been a high priority for budget writers or land grant university administrators.

The difference now is that funding for rural sociology as we know it does not look to get better. However, the bleak funding picture is not for the same reasons that relegated rural sociology and social science concerns to a low priority in the past. The issues to which we have devoted ourselves and our research and teaching are now at the forefront of many political agendas. Illiteracy, poverty, crime, health

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care, child care, underemployment, infrastructure, toxic waste, groundwater contamination, soil conservation, migration and immigration, absentee ownership, debt, capital access, jobs, land use, education, all topics that this group have examined, now have people's attention. These are the issues that command the increasingly limited public and private dollars available to address them. Most importantly, these issues await innovative (and I will emphasize presently non-existent) policies to address them. There is less in the pie that says rural sociology, but there is more in the pie that is rural sociology. It will require entrepreneurship on our part to operate successfully in this different funding arena.

A second reason the "market window" for rural sociology is now fundamentally different from the past relates to the institutional structures in which many of us find ourselves. Friedland (1982, 1989) argues that rural sociology has not found legitimacy in colleges of agriculture because we have no constituency in production agriculture. I take issue with Friedland on his narrow focus of rural sociology. I argue, as does Copp and others, that rural sociology is more than a sociology of agriculture or a sociology of farming. However, Friedland does contribute a perspective that is pertinent to my argument. Friedland describes rural sociology as a problem for colleges of agriculture because of the following:

. . . questions with which rural sociology has and should be concerned raise all kinds of problems for colleges of agriculture—indeed their very formulation represents a sharp break with the approach of the agricultural sciences in the United States. This formulation does not address the traditional constituency of production agriculture; rather it turns to consumers, a group with which most experiment station directors (deans and extension directors as well) have not been overly concerned.

It is a group with which they are increasingly becoming concerned. The University of Georgia, no hotbed of precedent setting, has made, or is in the process of making, several name changes to colleges and departments on campus. The College of Home Economics is now the College of Consumer and Family Sciences. The College of Agriculture is about to become the College of Agricultural and Environmental

Sciences. The Department of Agricultural Economics is in the process of changing its name to the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics. These name changes are not unique to The University of Georgia. Other universities have taken similar approaches. Such strategies reflect responses to changing "market" conditions. In large part, they all are in response to consumer driven issues.

Other institutional responses are also evident. Extension, not only in Georgia but across the region and nation, has made major changes in the past few years in reaction to these same changing market conditions. Through its programming of priorities and issues, extension has moved to make its legislative mandate more relevant to today's society. Issues such as youth at risk, rural economic development, water quality, solid waste, and family emotional and financial well-being are examples of these different responses. These priorities reflect a very different agenda for extension beyond only production agriculture. These new priorities have created entrepreneurial opportunities for rural sociologists in extension.

Wimberley (1990) provided a blueprint for linking the Extension Committee on Policy's (ECOP) Task Force on Rural Revitalization and the Experiment Station Committee on Policy's (ESCOP) Task Force on Agriculture and Community Viability with his publication of *Revitalizing the Rural Economy for Families and Communities*. This publication provided a vehicle for legitimizing rural development efforts by extension to legislators across the region and country. More importantly, this report provided an entrepreneurial blueprint that reflected, for the first time, a strengthened commitment to link the research and extension rural development initiatives at the national level. Rural sociologists have the opportunity to build the bridge between the Experiment Station Committee on Policy and the Extension Committee on Policy with entrepreneurship in our rural development work.

Institutional structures in which rural sociologists teach and do research and extension work are becoming much more responsive to consumer driven issues. Some may argue that changing a name or identifying new program priorities does not signify a fundamentally changed "market window" for rural sociology. The challenge can be made that resources have not yet shifted from production agriculture to these new, expanded constituencies. I agree. However, the third

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reason proposed for why the market window for rural sociology has changed will result, I suggest, in a reallocation of the resources.

The U.S., and especially the South, is undergoing a change in what I call the political demography of leadership. This might more euphemistically be described as the decline of the "good ole boy" system. A new generation of leadership, more educated, more urban, more cosmopolitan, more issues driven, more concerned with accountability, more defined by a "technological history," is assuming the reins of power. This is a group which will apply a "means test" (borrowed from social assistance programs) to all spending programs. Reallocations will result, priorities will shift. This new leadership will, however, be very attuned to how people and groups are affected by changes and shifting priorities in government programs and policies. Entrepreneurship on the part of rural sociologists can result in providing answers to these kinds of questions and concerns.

***Challenges for rural sociological entrepreneurship***

As alluded to earlier, the fundamental flaw in my character is one of unbridled optimism for the future of the kinds of things we do. My objective in the remainder of this address is to outline an area that I feel provides fertile ground for entrepreneurial activity by rural sociologists, identify the reasons why this is an important challenge for rural sociology, and indicate some of the potential rewards to rural sociology for working in this area. In essence, my goal is to encourage a discussion of the conceptual and methodological requirements for rural sociological entrepreneurship given the issues and environments I have described.

***The challenge of policy work for rural sociology***

Contrary to some impressions, rural sociologists in the south have not been reluctant to engage in policy work. Members of SRSA have distinguished themselves with solid contributions to the scholarship of policy development. Beaulieu's (1989) work in the area of human capital investment in the South, Garkovich's (1991) contributions to the area of education and economic development, Ross's (1985) analysis of county socioeconomic change, Jenkins' (1990) contributions to the debate on rural health services, the emerging work by Thigpen in natural resources and economic development linkages, and the

contributions by Bailey (1989) to the debate on siting hazardous waste facilities are only a few examples. Yet, our track record of accomplishments must be expanded. Newby (1982) took rural sociology to the woodshed for its failure to embrace policy work as a legitimate scholarly enterprise. His criticism was that

whenever rural sociologists engage with policy matters they are more likely to recommend wholesale structural changes beyond the reach of politics rather than piecemeal social engineering. Equally likely, however, they do not engage at all, preferring the purist pursuit of sociological truth rather than be tainted by compromise with the real world.

Does rural sociology fail to embrace policy work because we are entrenched in what Johnson (1984) has labelled as a disciplinary chauvinism? Perhaps we inadvertently have contributed to an institutional system that sees applied problem solving work as less than professionally rewarding. Obviously we have. However, I contend that a corollary reason also helps explain why our track record in policy work is not as exemplary as it should be.

In a less than scientific study of the list of speakers contained in six proceedings of conferences that looked at major policy issues in the South, I found only 6 rural sociologists (only 4 from the region) among 126 speakers.<sup>3</sup> Kuhn (1970), in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, argued that the major advances which occur in scientific disciplines result from the confrontation of disciplines with problems they cannot handle. Undeniably, we can't handle something we aren't going to touch. We are caught in a sociological catch-22 situation. Doing policy work may not get you rewards in the discipline, and not doing policy work can get the discipline left out of rewards passed out by decision-makers at budget time.

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<sup>3</sup>The conferences mentioned in this paper are: 1) Emerging Issues in the Rural Economy of the South, Birmingham, Alabama, January, 1986; 2) Policy Forum:Diversification Strategies for a New Southern Agriculture, Ft. Worth, Texas, July, 1986; 3) Southern Region Rural Development Policy Options Workshop, Birmingham, Alabama, October, 1988; 4) Revitalizing the Rural South:Extension's Role in Enhancing the Quality of Life, Birmingham, Alabama, January, 1990; 5) Community Strategies for Tomorrow's Local Infrastructure, Birmingham, Alabama, May, 1990; 6) Training and Jobs: Keys to Rural Economic Development, Huntsville, Alabama, April, 1990.

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Increasingly, the political, social, and economic milieu in which rural sociology operates will require that we contribute to policy formulation and debate.<sup>4</sup> In many respects, the milieu in which rural sociologists perform provide us with a measure of instant credibility to enter the policy debate. Flinn (1982) elaborates this point in the following:

Our proximity to the real world of political and economic controversy has prepared us for a form of sociological practice that is both reflexive and practically useful. Our transition to that practice is by no means complete, but I think we can derive some satisfaction from the fact that the present institutional challenges of rural sociology are helping the profession to steer a course between grand theory and abstracted empiricism and to develop a form of sociology that addresses important issues with theoretically meaningful concepts in ways that are understandable to clientele, many of whom have been essentially disenfranchised within the land grant system.

***Summary***

The involvement of rural sociologists in policy formulation and debate does not require that we sell our sociological souls to politicians or subjugate our scientific principals to a pseudo-science of political pragmatism. I like to think that we have brought rural sociology in the south to a point beyond either or choices of scholarly respectability or applied relevance. Entrepreneurship in policy by rural sociologists is nothing more than Mill's call for sociological imagination on our part. Mills (1959) challenged us that we must

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues— and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of rural sociology and where rural sociology needs to be going, see the Falk and Gilbert article, "Bringing Rural Sociology Back In," *Rural Sociology* 50(4), 1985, pp. 561-577. Their argument is compelling especially, when considering the need for rural sociology to embrace policy work.

them to personal troubles—and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time.

The market window for policy work by rural sociologists is as open as we care to make it. There are issues to which we can contribute now. The focus on environmental and natural resource issues during the decade of the 90's will provide opportunities to study not only the environmental movement itself, but the critiques of the many environmental blueprints for communities that will be created and debated. Hoban's (1989) developing work in the study of biotechnology and its implications on land grant universities, agriculture, and consumers provides ample areas for rural sociological entrepreneurship. Our agricultural economist colleagues have discovered impact assessment disguised as IMPLAN. We can contribute the missing link of social impact assessment, pioneered by rural sociologists such as Voland and Murdock, to their IMPLAN work. Other areas, such as leadership, education, health, community and rural development and agriculture are open to entrepreneurial contributions by rural sociologists, especially if our strategies and studies are defined in the context of policy makers current focus on the topic of economic development.

As rural sociologists we must not become bogged down in polemical battles over the definition of political issues, especially one such as economic development that is usually structured with very limited parameters. However, we must, most determinedly and astutely, help to redefine narrow political issues into more complete perspectives on problems. This point is most relevant to our credibility as rural sociologists in policy work. Unless the political system finds our definition of issues as useful and can see the logic of our analysis and its policy implications, we will have contributed little to solving the issue and perhaps less to rural sociology's future in policy work. That is our challenge.

I mentioned earlier the notion of pragmatic chauvinism. I have often been disheartened over the seeming inability of rural sociology

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and the land grant system to respond to problems that present themselves to us, or more succinctly, over our lack of being entrepreneurial. There is a perception, aptly described in a piece of "fugitive literature" by Glenn Johnson (1984), that "we have become enamored with a rather narrow definition of academic excellence or quality which elevates disciplinary accomplishments while impugning problem-solving and subject-matter activities." I plead guilty to being a pragmatist. However, I see rural sociology as providing tools, disciplinary tools, to respond to important questions and problems that people have.

C. Wright Mills gave us our reason for being entrepreneurial. He eloquently grasped the how and why of entrepreneurship. His challenge to us follows:

It is not only information that (people) need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artist and public, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

There are ample opportunities to apply a rural sociological entrepreneurship to the problems of the rural South. I challenge us as members of the SRSA to be about it.

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