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Rosalind P. Harris
University of Kentucky

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Hidden Voices: Linking Research, Practice and Policy to the Everyday Realities of Rural People

Rosalind P. Harris

*Department of Sociology
University of Kentucky*

How do we bring principles and practices to our research, teaching and outreach that increasingly move us toward greater wisdom and compassion in understanding and responding to the everyday realities of rural peoples' lives? This kind of question is no longer being asked solely by politically- and socially-engaged scholars working outside the academy or on the margins within the academy, but by administrators and scholars who have been committed to conventional views and approaches to research, teaching and outreach. Clearly the crises of modernity (i.e., psychic and social estrangement, persistent and growing social and economic inequality, ecological disruption and devastation, and so forth) have deepened our awareness that all of our lives are inextricably connected. As such, conventional models of research, teaching and outreach --- based upon assumptions of separateness, objectivity and hierarchy --- are giving way to approaches that acknowledge our embeddedness in a larger, living whole and the complex interconnected nature of our relationships.

Investigators of rural social life have historically run the gamut from working within theoretical and methodological paradigms that have given a presence to the everyday realities of rural peoples' lives to those that have marginalized or excluded them (Newby 1980). Most recently feminist, post-structural and post-colonial theories and methodologies have encouraged the exploration of assumptions that construct and elaborate "difference" between the researcher and the researched, the teacher and student, the activist and community resident (Lather 1991). These frameworks call for making explicit long-existing power relationships that have allowed those within the academy to characterize and define "The Other" unquestioned. Examples of scholarship on rural social change that engage these frameworks such as (Kloppenborg 1991) illuminate the possibilities for breaking down barriers, freeing voices, and creating space for authentic,

meaningful engagement and change within rural communities based on the everyday realities of peoples' lives.

The following discussion offers reflections from the year 2000 Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) Presidential Address that I made in Lexington, Kentucky. The address gave me the opportunity to re-visit experiences with hidden voices and the lived realities of peoples' lives. Over the last decade, I have been particularly inspired by students to explore principles and practices that would move people working in the academy toward greater wisdom and compassion in their work. I am pleased to have the opportunity to share my thoughts in response to these students' concerns.

Reflections On Hidden Voices

Some time ago, it seems almost another lifetime, I was just starting as a case worker with an organization created to protect the rights of disabled people in Hawaii. The attorney who worked with the organization asked me to accompany her to Waianae, a low income rural community on the west coast of the island of Oahu, to evaluate a case involving a nine-year-old hearing-impaired girl, who I will call Luana. The evaluation was necessary because of a family court question about whether, given Luana's disability, her family was capable of properly caring for her and making sure that she received the proper alternative schooling, remedial and other support.

I was somewhat familiar with Waianae, having worked there a few years earlier with families having difficulty meeting their health care needs. So on entering the community I was not surprised by the corrugated and dilapidated houses and other signs of poverty. However, the attorney, who I will call Sharon, was clearly taken aback and remarked "Do you believe this, this is like a scene from one of those 'Save the Children' clips about the conditions that children live in, in Third World countries." As we moved through the community, Sharon continued to make similar assessments, especially calling into question the capabilities of families who were living "in this way" to properly care for their children. As we approached Luana's house I became increasingly concerned that Luana's fate and that of her family would rest with someone who knew so very little about Waianae's history, its culture, and the social, economic and political forces that had shaped to Waianae.

As it turned out no one was home at Luana's house. And although the house had every sign of being well taken care of and valued, Sharon entered the house to conduct an inspection. I had to ask how she would feel if someone were to enter her home when she was not there. Her reaction to my question indicated that this was the first time that she had stopped to consider that perhaps Luana and her family were real people with legitimate feelings, sensibilities and voices. On our way out, about a block away from the house, there was Luana --- tangled among a group of energetic, noisy and mostly shoeless children. We stopped to talk for a bit with this little girl, who seemed to me to be well cared for and comfortable, both in her community and in her home.

Needless to say, the ride back to Honolulu was very interesting. I found myself desperately sharing background information on Waianae's history to counter Sharon's criticisms of Luana's family and the ability of the family to care for her and her disability. I knew that Sharon was only finding fault with their poverty and quickly forming a recommendation to place Luana in foster care with a family in Honolulu. What I shared with Sharon about Waianae's history has deep resonances with the histories of many other rural communities (see Fitchen 1995; Falk, Talley and Rankin 1993; and others). At one time the area was part of a self-sufficient community of small-scale farmers primarily producing taro and other root crops. After being effectively colonized over time by the United States, the land was taken over for sugar cane and pineapple production. Later, when these companies pulled out to seek less expensive labor in the Philippines, the area's traditional bases of reciprocity and exchange had been diminished. There were few modern alternatives for making a living. This resulted in the significant weakening of the culture, including social and kinship networks, and left a largely Hawaiian and part-Hawaiian population with few economic options.

As we can see from this background, Waianae's complex history and the complex histories of other rural communities embed rich cultural knowledges about economies of affection and reciprocity, the forces that weakened them, and clues to what may be healing for them. Unfortunately this knowledge is rarely brought to the foreground when we ask what can be done to improve life for people in rural communities.

What We Prize and What We Hide

The work of sociologist Enzo Mingione, author of *Fragmented Societies: A Sociology of Life Beyond the Market Paradigm* (1991), and the much, much earlier work of Karl Polanyi in his book *The Great Transformation* (1944/1975), suggest that so much of the rich background, that contextualizes current problems and offers inspiration for solutions for rural communities is hidden from us as scholars, policymakers, and even at times as advocates and activists, because we are all captives of a paradigm that insists upon the paramountcy of the economy in structuring and directing human social relations, terms of engagement and, I would add, terms of endearment. To turn an old phrase around a bit, I would like to argue that “believing is seeing.” In other words, what we have come to take for granted and hold as natural we believe to be so, and these beliefs shape our research, what we write about, advocate for, fight for and make policy recommendations regarding.

A cursory review of our national and regional journals and policy discourses indicate that there continues to be an intense focus on macro-economic development and that what we believe about rural communities is that they need growth and development through the importation of external agencies. What we therefore research, make policy regarding and fight for are ways to accomplish this. But what do the people who live these realities everyday in their communities experience and believe? Reflections by researchers on their work in rural communities (see Dill and Williams 1992; Duncan 1996; Gaventa, Smith and Willingham 1990; Lewis 2000; and Smith’s 1998 documentary film *Beyond Measure: Appalachian Culture and Community*) show that there are enduring economies of affection and reciprocity enfolded within the social and kin networks of the communities in which they worked.

These empirical works illuminate what Mingione (1999) and Polanyi’s (1944/1975) theoretical frameworks posit — that the formation of a dominant economic view in the West, with the elaboration of a modern economic rationality over the past five hundred years, is just that; a historically specific way of thinking about and organizing humans to meet their material needs. It is not “the way” to organize humans to meet their material needs across histories, geographies and cultures. Not only do the historical and archeological

records of human societies affirm the varied and complex bases upon which they organized systems of reciprocity and exchange, the empirical work that we just mentioned affirms these as well. These are ancient phenomena. They are enduring phenomena.

Given this, it is important to ask what has been and is hidden, missed or dismissed by so narrowly defining the terms of human exchange and engagement. Tickamyer et al. (1993) note, in their article on "Women and Persistent Rural Poverty" in the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) Task Force report on rural poverty, that within the modern economic paradigm there is the tendency to think in terms of dichotomies (e.g., modern versus traditional sectors, productive versus reproductive activities, economic versus volunteer activities). They argue that work done in the latter categories is not counted as work and therefore, in some cases, diminishes the potential to encourage such activities for family and community well being. In other cases it means that certain communities and groups lose out on entitlements such as health care benefits, workers compensation and retirement. These gaps in our theories and methodologies have consequences for our research, policy and practice. But, as importantly, what are the consequences for the lives of the "other," the one researched and written about, the one for whom policy is prescribed, the one who is examined time and time again?

The Lived Realities of "The Other"

A few years before the 1996 welfare reform legislation was passed, I had the opportunity to visit the then-governor of Kentucky. I was part of a group attempting to negotiate a more realistic and, I will say, more just eligibility and entitlement scale for families on welfare. The group was made up of women who were welfare recipients, representatives of various advocacy groups, people working in community services, academics and people linked to various policy formulation groups. Prior to meeting with the Governor our group met to plan strategy. However it became very clear during this planning meeting that, although the intentions of our various sub-groups were basically the same, our ways of representing the complex issues involved, of crafting a presentation for the Governor, were very different. Most notably, the women receiving welfare spoke from their everyday struggles --- bartering, exchanging, going without to stretch a benefit

check that provided far less than needed for survival, let alone well-being.

The women spoke of their stigmatized identities as welfare recipients, the taunts their children faced when sent to the store to make purchases with food stamps. They spoke with passion and pain, revealing the complexities of their lived experiences; and it was real, but all of this was soon moderated by the voices of reasoned good intention. The advocates, community workers, scholars and policy players felt it would be more effective to talk in more strategic and tactical terms about what was possible, given the political lay of the land. The result was the drafting of a carefully worded, tidy, technical document as the group's position paper to the Governor. The tension was palpable as we left the planning meeting to meet with the Governor. The women on welfare gathered together outside of the meeting room and talked in hushed, hurt tones about being silenced, of not being given the opportunity to let the impact of their pained, difficult lives influence the Governor's position on welfare. Whatever the wisdom in the ultimate strategy taken by the group, the voices of the very people whose lives were being affected were effectively silenced.

But not entirely. We entered the Governor's office and used the tidy document drafted earlier as a point of departure for discussion. The Governor reacted in a predictable manner to what he saw as a fairly liberal proposal for changes in welfare benefits, making a statement about his sympathies for the difficulties low income people might be facing, but saying he didn't want to be paying for women to sit and watch TV and eat potato chips all day. With this said, the sobs of one of the women began to fill the room as she guided us through a day in her very stressed and pained life. She ended by saying to the Governor: "You don't know my world, you don't know my life, how can you make these decisions not knowing?" The Governor tearfully acknowledged the truth in what she said --- he didn't know

Wearing the Mask ... Unmasking

The writings on the lives of colonial peoples by Fanon (1986) and Memmi (1990) help us to understand the psycho-cultural dynamics of having to swallow our voices, hide our true faces, our true hearts, our true realities, in the face of someone who doesn't know our reality, but

yet whose story about us plays a dominant role in shaping our possibilities and our fates. Through her reflections on her experiences with participatory research in Appalachia, Lewis (2000) describes what happens when a story is imposed upon a people and becomes their belief about themselves; the difference when their stories re-surface in their own words and we, as de-professionalized intellectuals, enhance the validity of those stories through sharing our lives and skills with them, as equals. Lewis offers alternative frameworks for authentic engagement and the liberation of hidden voices.

But what is it that gets in the way of our engaging people at the level of their lived experiences and of acknowledging the inextricable ties we have to each other as humans?

Certainly there are the institutional barriers. Lewis has shown it is very difficult to engage people at a particular level of depth and authenticity while working within a university; for those working in government, public, and private sectors the tensions are similar. But, in essence, institutions are the reflections of the psychological and social dramas we play out as humans. Ultimately, what gets in the way, I believe, is something as simple or as fierce as being fearful. Not necessarily fearful of people who we perceive as being different from us, or fearful of their problems and circumstances, but afraid, in a sense, of finding or losing ourselves.

There is a tremendous amount of energy that goes into constructing a self, an identity. Once constructed, there is a tremendous amount of energy that goes into maintaining a self, and with good reason. We are born into a world that is awesome, and soon becomes overwhelming and mighty confusing. Accumulating the parts of a self that we will front as our identity gives us boundaries and solidity, and a sense of being protected, a sense of being safe.

How do I answer the question "Who am I?" I usually begin with a name, a physical description in relation to some cultural norm. Then I talk about myself in relationship to others. I am a mother, a sister, a wife and so forth. Then I talk about myself in terms of what I do, what I work at, who I work for and so forth.

With this packaging we feel solid and safe, ready to go, and to continue to feel solid and safe we will do just about anything. When our identities are threatened we defend ourselves by pulling in, lashing out, accommodating, pretending, hiding; whatever we do, we are defending our sense of being solid. But, as hard as we try, life never

lets us forget that we are not solid. We age and change physically, lose connection with our early vocations, lose parts of ourselves psychically or physically, or lose someone we love to estrangement or to death.

When the rug gets pulled out and we ask “Who am I?” the answers are much less solid, much more ambiguous. And, in the space between the question and the answer, there is the opportunity to let ourselves feel our own vulnerability, our own precious breaking hearts, and to know that it is through the journey to our hearts that we are inextricably connected to one another.

The stories and dramas that unfold in our individual lives may be very different, but the energies that they enfold are one and the same. Understanding and opening to this recognition helps us to extend to others the compassion that we have begun to extend to ourselves and to diminish the hold that fear has had.

Authentic Engagement: Responding to the Call

Each year the students in my classes grow hungrier for ways to connect their work in the academy to the realities lived out by people in their everyday lives. Students in my undergraduate classes conduct oral histories with elderly family members or community folk as a way of knowing that they themselves are part of the history that has unfolded in their communities and that when analyzing conditions and problems there are multiple realities across generations to appreciate. Graduate students in particular are in ferment about the models available to them within the academy. In particular, they seek guidance on how to ground their research and teaching in peoples’ everyday realities. These students have been in the forefront of exploring theoretical and methodological writings in the feminist, post-structural and post-colonial literatures that help them in this regard.

Theoretical writings of scholars such as Smith (1987), Collins (1990), Hall (1990), Escobar (1995), Mohanty (1988) and others have guided students to be much more cautious about the normalizing and essentializing effects of frameworks such as the classical economic framework, discussed earlier, that claims to apply to all peoples across histories, geographies and cultures. Instead these works invite students to appreciate the multiplicity of perspectives extending from the multiplicity of life world experiences. The methodological writings

represented by scholars such as Smith (1999) suggest participatory strategies that center the voices, experiences and prerogatives of community people and honor the knowledge as coming from and belonging to the community.

In the form of an "Open Letter to the Presidents and Chancellors of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges," the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities (1999) called for these institutions to return to their roots, to become engaged institutions. Rural sociology emerged out of an activist concern that attention to the impacts of a rapidly modernizing economy on rural communities was being eclipsed, hidden by a focus on the impacts of this transformation in urban areas. And despite persisting criticisms of what are perceived as rural sociology's theoretical and methodological shortcomings or irrelevancies, as carefully reviewed in Newby's (1980) trend report on rural sociology, Wilkinson (1985:24) observes: "that rural sociology involves not one, but several theoretical perspectives is a sign of vitality...[it] is an applied field with a well defined agenda of real life problems to address [and] has enough of a focus in the problems themselves without adding theoretical or methodological monism." Clearly rural sociology is poised through its history of experience, its residence for the most part within the land grant structure, and through disciplinary self-reflection, to respond to the call of students and institutions for engagement by providing guidance in this regard.

The nature of this engagement is critical. As Helen Lewis so touchingly points out through the stories of her work in Appalachia, it is one thing to be *in* the community, it is another to be *of* the community, with the hearts and experiences of the people in those communities guiding the engagement. Students and community people are providing us with a wealth of inspiration, and specific guidance to new frameworks and strategies for realizing this kind of engagement. If we listen, and take this inspiration to heart, it can strengthen us as a discipline surely, but it can also lead us to work together at all levels in inhabiting the fullness of our hearts. It is in this way, ultimately, that we bring the principles and practices to our research, teaching and outreach that move us toward greater wisdom and compassion in understanding and responding to the everyday realities of rural peoples' lives.

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