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Gene L. Theodori
Sam Houston State University

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The 2009
Southern Rural Sociological Association
Presidential Address

**MODIFICATION AND ADAPTATION IN RURAL SOCIOLOGY:
PART I***

GENE L. THEODORI

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

I met my wife at an event cosponsored by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development and the Southern Rural Development Center. The event was held in Nashville, Tennessee. I lived and worked in Texas. Ann, my wife, lived and worked in Nebraska at the time. She taught English at McCook Community College.

As our long-distance relationship blossomed, she told her mother and father that she had started dating a guy who lived in Texas. She told them that he once chased rodeos, and was now a university professor. Her father, who had been a teacher at the same community college where Ann taught, asked: “What does he teach?” Ann answered: “Well, he teaches community and community development.” She then proceeded to say: “He has a PhD in rural sociology.” Her father then responded: “Sounds made up to me.”

Sounds made up to me. Holding a PhD in rural sociology sounded made up to Ann’s father, Mr. Rodney Horst, who happens, by the way, to be a very well educated man living in one of the most rural areas of the country—western Nebraska. How do you respond to a comment like that? How would you? I asked the guy for his blessing. I told him that I wished to marry his daughter.

Think for a moment about Rod’s response: “Sounds made up to me.” His response implies he did not know that such a “profession”—that profession of rural sociology—existed. Ann’s father is not alone. There are countless numbers of folks

*Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association, Atlanta, GA, February 2, 2009. Address correspondence to Gene L. Theodori, Sam Houston State University, Department of Sociology, Box 2446, Huntsville, TX 77341-2446. Email: gtheodori@shsu.edu.

who know little-to-nothing about rural sociology. We in academia need not look too far to find such individuals. Some of us are housed in Departments of Sociology. I suspect that many of our sociology colleagues do not know what rural sociology is. Exactly how much has changed since 1917, when Professor John Gillette (1917: 163) stated that “In the vernacular, it has been said of rural sociology, “There ain’t no such animal”?”

THE PROFESSION OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY

By no means do I claim to be an expert in the sociology of work, or deeply versed in the literature on professions. The study of professions, though, has recently captured my attention. The more I read, the more I attempt to dissect ours.

One book from which I draw heavily for today’s presentation is Andrew Abbott’s (1988) *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Abbott is Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. In his book, Abbott focused on the evolution and interrelations of professions, and the ways occupational groups control knowledge and skill. He made the following three points about the extant studies of professions: (1) most authors study professions one at a time; (2) most authors assume that professions grow through a series of professionalization; and, (3) most authors talk less about what professions do than about how they are organized to do it.

When applying Abbott’s ideas to studies of the profession of rural sociology, it appears that he was spot on. Take his first point: *Most authors study professions one at a time*. Such has typically been the case in rural sociology (e.g., Bealer 1990; Christenson and Garkovich 1985; Falk 1996; Falk and Gilbert 1985; Falk and Zhao 1989, 1990; Ford 1985; Haller and Borgatta 1968; Harper 1991; Picou, Wells, and Nyberg 1978; Picou, Curry, and Wells 1990; Sewell 1965; Stokes and Miller 1985).

I now move to Abbott’s second point: *Most authors assume that professions grow through a series of professionalization*. The professions literature is marked with certain events—events that are generally associated with the concept of “professionalization.” Much has been written about the development of rural sociology and the events, or phases, it has undergone throughout its maturation (Duncan 1954; Field and Burch 1991; Gee 1929; Groves 1920; Hoffer 1926, 1961; Lobao 2007; Nelson 1965; Newby 1980; Sanderson 1927; Sims 1928; Smith and Zopf 1970). Authors generally agree that rural sociology in the United States traces its roots to the era of the American Civil War. The vast majority of us have read about the influence that the Patrons of Husbandry, the Farmer’s Alliance, and the rural clergy had on the development of rural sociology in the post-Civil War years.

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We know about President Roosevelt's Country Life Commission—an important milestone along the way to the establishment of rural sociology.

Let us briefly review three of the “events” that authors refer to when writing about the concept of professionalization. I will do this in the context of rural sociology, of course.

Event 1: The first professional association

A major event associated with professionalization is, unsurprisingly, the “first professional association.” Legend has it that circa 1911, a caucus of those interested in rural issues was formed in the American Sociological Society (the ASS), the precursor to the ASA (the American Sociological Association). In 1916, the theme of the 11th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Society, held December 27–29, in Columbus, Ohio, was “The Sociology of Rural Life.” This meeting sparked more interest in rural issues.

The Section on Rural Sociology was formally established within the American Sociological Society at the annual meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1921 (Sanderson 1939). The Section charged extra dues; it held regular business meetings and conducted professional programs during the ASS meetings (Coleman 1957). The first official meeting of the new Rural Sociology Section was held before the regular ASS sessions at the Chicago meeting in 1922 (Sanderson 1939).

Six years later, the annual ASS meeting was back in Chicago. The theme of the 1928 meeting was “The Rural Community.” Over the next decade, numerous sources of friction between the American Sociological Society and the Rural Sociology Section became manifest. Included here was the parent society's rule that no person could present more than one paper at an annual meeting (Coleman 1957). Lee Coleman stated in his summary of events leading up to the founding of the journal *Rural Sociology* and its development during the first twenty years, which was published in the journal in 1957 (p. 313), that “The rural sociologists felt that their section was semi-autonomous and that a member should be able to present a paper in one of the program sections of the parent society as well as participating in the program of the Rural Sociology Section.”

In 1937, the affairs of the Rural Sociology Section were brought to an end, and the Rural Sociological Society was officially organized. In 1938, the first annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society was held in Detroit, Michigan.

Event 2: The first national-level journal

Volume 1, number 1 of *Rural Sociology* was published in 1936 by the Rural Sociology Section of the ASS. Louisiana State University was the guarantor. T. Lynn Smith of LSU was the managing editor. The Editorial Board consisted of: Chair, Lowry Nelson (Utah State College); John H. Kolb (University of Wisconsin); C.E. Lively (Ohio State University); Dwight Sanderson (Cornell University); and Carle C. Zimmerman (Harvard University). Printed on the front cover are the words “Devoted to *Scientific Study* of Rural Life.” Inside the front cover it is stated that the subscription price was \$2.00 per year; single copies, 50 cents each. On page 5 appears the “Statement of the Editorial Board.” It reads:

The purpose of the journal is to afford an additional medium of expression for scholars in the field of Rural Sociology. The pages will not be confined exclusively to Rural Sociologists as a professional group; articles are invited from workers in related fields of social science, from teachers, and from rural workers who may contribute to the sociology of rural life.

Volume 3, Number 1 of *Rural Sociology* was published by the newly established Rural Sociological Society of America. On the front cover of Volume 4, Number 1, it is stated that *Rural Sociology* is the “Official Organ of the Rural Sociological Society.”

It is really not my intent to provide a history lesson on the first professional association in rural sociology and its official journal. Everything that I have just said, as you will soon understand, sets the stage for Abbott’s third point. Before I turn to his third point, let me mention another event that is commonly associated with professionalization.

Event 3: The first university-based professional education

One paper given at the aforementioned 11th annual meeting of the American Sociological Society meeting was presented by Dwight Sanderson, who served as the first President of the Rural Sociological Society some 22 years later. The title of his paper was “The Teaching of Rural Sociology: Particularly in the Land-Grant Colleges and University.” That topic would make an excellent paper at our present meeting. In the paper, which was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Sanderson 1917a), as well as in the proceedings from the meeting (Sanderson 1917b), Sanderson noted that Professor Henderson in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago appears to have been the first to offer a course on rural

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social life in the United States. Listed in the Department of Sociology's announcements for 1894–1895 was a course called “Social Conditions in American Rural Life.” The following description appeared:

Some problems of amelioration, presented by life on American farms and in villages, will be considered. M. First Term. Winter Quarter. Associate Professor Henderson. (Sanderson 1917a: 437).

In 1904, it is believed Kenyon Butterfield, while president of the Rhode Island College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, taught the first course in Rural Sociology at any land-grant college (Sanderson 1917a).

Now I turn to Abbott's third point: *Most authors talk less about what professions do than about how they are organized to do it.* Such is the case with rural sociology. Although I would not call the presidential addresses of the Rural Sociological Society published in the journal *Rural Sociology* studies of the profession, I would say that one might be hard-pressed to find a collection of writings in which the authors talk less about what the profession does (i.e., the profession of rural sociology) than about how it is organized to do it (i.e., the Rural Sociological Society).

I fully appreciate the navel-gazing, the introspection, the self-flagellation—call it what you want—of the past RSS presidents. Such navel-gazing, introspection, self-flagellation has become “a tradition in rural sociology,” as Bill Flinn (1982:1) noted in his 1981 presidential address titled “Rural Sociology: Prospects and Dilemmas in the 1980s.” Every profession, I would argue, needs to self-examine itself. The only problem arises when the focus on *how the profession is organized* takes precedence over *what the profession does*.

I have no doubts that professionals in the Rural Sociological Society need to “break walls and build bridges,” as our good friend, esteemed colleague, and past president of both the Southern Rural Sociological Association and the Rural Sociological Society Dr. Lionel J. “Bo” Beaulieu (2005) suggested in his 2004 RSS presidential address titled “Breaking Walls, Building Bridges: Expanding the Presence and Relevance of Rural Sociology.” I have no doubts that professionals in the Rural Sociological Society need to swim in both “blue oceans” and “red oceans” as my good friend, esteemed colleague, and past president of the RSS Dr. Rick Krannich (2008) suggested in his 2007 presidential address titled “Rural Sociology at the Crossroads.”

Noting that not all RSS presidential addresses, including the two just mentioned, have focused solely on the RSS is important. Many have addressed issues with the profession itself, albeit to varying degrees. However, if you read them carefully, most—not all—inevitably drawn a distinction between what rural sociology *is* and what it *ought to be*.

The first president of the Rural Sociological Society stated in his remarks that “Presidential addresses give opportunity for the incumbent to make a contribution to knowledge and to express his views as to the work of the organization” (Sanderson 1939: 123). I am not standing before you today to express my views of the organization—not of the RSS or the Southern Rural Sociological Association. Instead, I stand before you today as incumbent SRSA president to express my views of the profession, and in doing so, I hope to make a contribution to knowledge.

RURAL SOCIOLOGY’S JURISDICTION

At this point, I shall return to Abbott’s (1988) book on the system of professions. Professions, paraphrasing the author, are more-or-less exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases. Professions, in Abbott’s theory, make up an interdependent system. In the system, each profession controls its activities under various kinds of jurisdiction. Jurisdiction is a main concept in Abbott’s theory; it refers to the link between a profession and its work. Sometimes a profession has full jurisdictional control; other times it does not. Jurisdictional boundaries, according to Abbott, are perpetually in dispute, both in local practice and in national claims.

Before continuing, allow me to mention an individual who I had the opportunity to work and study with in graduate school. If you never had the pleasure of personally meeting this individual, then you probably have read some of his writings or at least heard his name. I mention this individual because his perspective on our profession has been viewed as somewhat unique.

The individual to whom I am referring is Jim Copp. Many of you knew the late Jim Copp. For those of you who did not, Jim was President of the Rural Sociological Society from 1971 to 1972. I had the opportunity to work and study with Jim while completing my Master’s degree; I served as his teaching assistant and learned much from Jim. Part of the reason I chose to become a rural sociologist is because of Jim.

On August 26, 1972, at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Jim delivered his contentious presidential address titled “Rural Sociology and Rural Development.” With a title like that, what could possibly be contentious?

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I was not in the audience. My first Rural Sociological Society meeting came a few years later. Maybe some of you were there and heard him make the following points (which appear in the printed version of his address in *Rural Sociology*, volume 37, number 4):

Many of us think we know what rural sociology is, but I am not sure that we do. I cannot accept the facile definition that “rural sociology is what rural sociologists do” (Copp 1972:515).

After reviewing the work of major centers of rural sociological research in 1969 and 1970, I am convinced that considerable activity undertaken by rural sociologists is not *rural* sociology (Copp 1972:515–16).

In my opinion, we know less about contemporary rural society in 1972 than we knew about the contemporary rural society in the 1940s (Copp 1972:516).

If most of the research which rural sociologists were doing in 1969 and 1970 were to have somehow disappeared, the world would have noticed little loss (Copp 1972:521).

As a result of my survey, I came to the conclusion that rural sociologists really were not the masters of the phenomena of rural society. We toyed with it, but I did not perceive a great depth of understanding (Copp 1972:521).

Fast forward to February 2009. It has been thirty-six and a half years since Jim made those remarks. Today, do we know what rural sociology is? If rural sociology is, as Jim said, not necessarily what rural sociologists do, can each of us—myself included—tell each other what rural sociology *is*, not what it *ought to be*? Can we convincingly tell our sociology peers that such an animal does, in fact, exist? How about my father-in-law?

Is the research undertaken by rural sociologists today *rural* sociology? Do we know more about contemporary rural society in 2009 than we knew about contemporary rural society in 1972? How about rural society in the 1940s? If most of the research which rural sociologists conducted in 2007 and 2008 were to disappear somehow, would the world notice a great loss? Are rural sociologists

really the masters of the phenomena of rural society? Or do we just toy with the idea? Do we understand it to any great depth?

Before we attempt to answer any of these questions, let us return to Abbott's theory of professions. Abbott's underlying concerns in the book include the evolution and interrelations of professions, and the ways occupational groups control knowledge and skill. Abbott argues that the evolution of professions results from their interrelations. These interrelations are, in turn, determined by the way these groups control their knowledge and skill. "Control of knowledge and its application," Abbott (1988: 2) claims, "means dominating outsiders who attack that control."

If rural sociology is, in fact, a profession, then what "knowledge" does it control? Be careful when answering this question. Think in terms of what *is* as opposed to what *ought to be*. The abstract knowledge that rural sociology *ought* to control is "the sociology of rural." Such an abstract knowledge system does not exist. The fact of the matter is that the profession of rural sociology knows very little about "the sociological meaning of rural." Instead, through our profession's academic knowledge, we have come to understand bits and pieces of information—"specks" of information, if you may—concerning sociological issues in rural areas.

Sure, this work, with its spattering of topics, has increased our knowledge of certain sociological topics in rural areas, but what has it done to increase our understanding of the sociology of rural? In rural sociology, "rural" has become merely a setting in which to conduct research on topics of sociological interest. I assert that the word "rural" in rural sociology should be viewed as a noun, not as an adjective to describe a kind or type of sociology. Rural should be viewed as an object of study rather than just a location.

Concomitantly, rural has become a concept devoid of meaning in much of the rural sociological work. Allow me to explain using another quick story. In August 2008, I attended the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Boston, Massachusetts. Three of my friends and I were sitting at the pub "talking shop." Two of my three friends there with me that night are members of both the SRSA and the RSS. The other is not a member of the SRSA or the RSS, but is a member of the ASA. We were talking about our current research projects, data sets that we were currently analyzing, and papers on which we were working. My sociology friend asked what it would take to publish one of his papers on which he was currently working in a rural sociology journal. My rural sociology colleagues asked him if he had a population variable. Both said that he would need a population

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variable that would distinguish between the rural and urban respondents if he wanted to publish in a rural sociology journal.

Do I need to elaborate on what is wrong here? Probably not. Population size—which is used in Census Bureau definitions of rural, as well as other agencies—may be a convenient guide to differentiate between degrees of urban and rural. However, population does little to define rural in a sociological sense.

In 1929, Sorokin and Zimmerman, in their text *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology*, set out to define rural by describing the universal traits that are constant in rural places, and those that make rural different from urban. Rural, for them, was an ideal-typical construct. They noted that an adequate definition of rural and urban cannot reside with solely one of the following: size of community; density of population; or, an official Census definition. According to Sorokin and Zimmerman (1929), rural and urban are undescrivable by only one characteristic. Therefore, an adequate definition must include several traits. They proposed nine differential characteristics of rural and urban communities that they believed were relatively constant and repeated in time and space. Here, I will only list them: (1) occupational differences; (2) environmental differences; (3) differences in the size of communities; (4) differences in the population; (5) differences in the homogeneity and the heterogeneity of populations; (6) differences in social mobility; (7) differences in direction of migration; (8) differences in social differentiation and stratification; and, (9) differences in social interactions.

Following Sorokin and Zimmerman, Bob Bealer, Bunny Willits, and Bill Kuvlesky in 1965 and Bunny Willits and Bob Bealer in 1967 asserted that there are three substantive aspects to defining rurality—an ecological component, an occupational component, and a sociocultural component. The ecological component refers primarily to the distribution of people in spatial terms, with rural meaning a high land-to-human ratio. The occupational component deals with the historical linkage between rural places and the pattern of employment in extractive industries, such as farming, forestry, and mining. The sociocultural component refers to patterns of interaction and reflects the adherence to traditional values by rural people. Like Sorokin and Zimmerman, the trio of Bealer, Willits, and Kuvlesky claimed that defining rural solely as only an ecological, occupational, or sociocultural facet would not be logical or practical. Instead, a composite definition is needed.

Bealer, Willits, and Kuvlesky wrote about this in the mid-to-late 1960s. What work has since been conducted? One piece of scholarship with which I am familiar is an article titled “Who is Rural? A Typological Approach to the Examination of

Rurality” by Mike Miller and Al Luloff, published in *Rural Sociology* in 1981. That article was published over a quarter of a century ago. Maybe you can direct me to other, more recent publications.

IN CLOSING

The profession needs a conception of the sociological meaning of rural. Without it, I am afraid, we lack academic jurisdiction. As Abbott (1988: 53–54) stated “The ability of a profession to sustain its jurisdictions lies partly in the power and prestige of its academic knowledge.” He continued:

The academic, abstract knowledge system is thus universally important throughout the professions. It is therefore not surprising that jurisdictional assaults are often directed at the academic level (Abbott 1988:55).

Early in the 20th century, Charles Galpin was optimistic about staking the jurisdictional claim of the fledgling profession in the academy. In 1917, he stated (Galpin 1917: 212):

Very likely at our colleges and universities the rural sociologist will be stepping upon somebody’s toes for a decade. I wish simply to take this opportunity to encourage our younger men to poach on these adjoining domains until ordered out by some responsible party who will adequately look after the interests of the farmer.

How many toes are we rural sociologists stepping on? The only toes we are stepping on these days are our own. In the system of professions, how many interprofessional competitions has rural sociology won? By spending the vast majority of our time and effort focusing on how our profession is organized, on whether or not we should change the name of our national professional association, on whether or not we should hold our annual meetings on the campuses of land-grant universities as opposed to holding them in expensive conference venues in many of our major cities, on how we can reach out to new constituents and recruit new members, on whether or not we should change the name of this regional association’s journal, etc., as opposed to focusing on what it is that our profession is actually doing, our jurisdiction has weakened substantially.

On the home page of the Rural Sociological Society, it is stated: This website is intended to serve all those interested in rural people and places. Look at it. For

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those interested in rural people and places, what can be found on the website? Little-to-nothing. However, there is much information about the professional association.

As I worked to prepare a concluding comment, I asked myself what could I possibly say that has not been said before. I decided the best way to conclude would be with a quote by a rural sociologist about the profession of rural sociology. It has been just more than nine decades since Professor George H. von Tungetn (1917: 210), then at Iowa State College, declared:

I am in favor, therefore, of not wasting energy in the defense of either the title or the study of our field, but rather of getting into the work at once, and in full force. Let us spend our energies in doing the work that is to be found in this large field and thus build up a defense of the same, if such is needed, with our accomplishments rather than with our words. Here as elsewhere, "Actions speak louder than words."

It has been approximately 93 years since those words were uttered. Is it not time already to modify and adapt our profession to deal with the intricacies of rural?

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