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MODEL LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR INTRODUCTORY RURAL SOCIOLOGY: A PROPOSAL AND RATIONALE

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ABSTRACT

While rural sociologists have demonstrated their commitment to sharing ideas about teaching approaches and methods, they have given less systematic attention to the content of introductory rural sociology and its connections to the field's mission of improving rural well-being. The purpose of this note is to make a case for developing model learning outcomes for introductory rural sociology and to present an organizing framework and sample outcomes for initiating discussion. First, a rationale for using learning outcomes as the means of sharing professional expectations is presented. Next, the methods used to arrive at a proposed organizational framework are described. It is based on themes about the significance of rural/urban context in social life and is sufficiently flexible to accommodate two common curricular roles of introductory courses. Finally, sample learning outcomes are presented for each theme and ideas for utilizing them are discussed.

Rural sociologists have demonstrated their commitment to sharing ideas about teaching approaches and techniques by publishing teaching materials (cf., Donnermeyer et al. 2005; Jenkins and Rakowski 2000; Wright 2006) and organizing paper and panel sessions at meetings of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS). Some recent sessions have focused on techniques for engaging students in the classroom generally or in relation to particular topics,¹ while others have focused on the use of community-based projects to involve students in addressing local needs.² Community-based approaches have been presented to integrate teaching and service (cf., Marullo and Strand 2004), and are particularly well-suited

¹Sessions include: "Students in the Learning Process" (2009); "Workshop on Teaching Research Ethics in Sociology and Rural Sociology," "Teaching Rural Sociology at the Undergraduate Level," "Explorations in Teaching and Engaging Students in Agrifood System Studies," and "Teaching Community" (2008); "Best Practices in Teaching Rural Sociology" (2008 and 2007); "Teaching and Learning in Rural Sociology" (2007); "Teaching the Content of Rural Sociology to Freshmen" (2006); and "Enhancing Engagement and Relevance I" (2005).

²Sessions include: "Strategies for Increasing Student and Community Engagement in the Research Process" and "Beyond the Classroom: Public Sociology and Local Knowledge" (2008); "Community-Based Research as Teaching Pedagogy," "Teaching, Research, and Service: Benefits of Using Community-Based Research in Sociology Courses," and "Integrating Instruction and Outreach: Enhancing Community Based Learning" (2006); and "Enhancing Engagement and Relevance II" (2005).

to rural sociology's focus on addressing the needs of rural people and places (cf., Sachs 2007).

Although these discussions about teaching **methods** are clearly integrated with matters of **content**, there has been little systematic attention to the content of introductory rural sociology courses (those providing a survey of topics in the field) and its connections to the field's applied mission. While some introductory courses may contribute directly through community-based projects, they all contribute at a more fundamental level by sensitizing an increasingly urban and suburban student body to the significance of rural/urban context in social life. As rural sociology programs are reorganized into specialty areas (cf., Falk and Lyson 2007; Krannich 2008) and individual courses serve a greater variety of curricular functions, it will be harder to stay connected to the "big picture" without a mechanism for sharing expectations.

The purpose of this note is to make a case for developing model learning outcomes for introductory rural sociology and to present an organizing framework and sample outcomes for initiating discussion. It is organized as follows. First, a rationale for using model learning outcomes as the means of sharing professional expectations is presented. Next, the methodology used to arrive at a proposed organizational framework is described. The framework is based on themes about the significance of rural/urban context in social life and is sufficiently flexible to accommodate two common curricular roles of introductory courses. Finally, sample learning outcomes are presented and ideas for utilizing them are discussed.

WHY DEVELOP MODEL LEARNING OUTCOMES?

Learning outcomes are statements of what students are expected to know and do upon completion of a course or curriculum. In the 1980s, outcome statements came into greater use along with the growing emphasis on assessment in higher education because they form the basis upon which to measure student learning (cf., American Sociological Association (ASA) Task Force on Assessing the Undergraduate Sociology Major 2005; Eck, Johnson, and Wylie 2001; Polomba and Banta 1999; Wagenaar 2002; Weiss et al. 2002). For example, the ASA (2005:41) has stated that sociology majors should be able to "describe how sociology differs from and is similar to other social sciences, and give examples of these differences" (among numerous other goals). If students are unable to describe these similarities and differences adequately, the curriculum may need to be revisited.

As summarized by Eck et al. (2001) and more recently by Spalter-Roth and Scelza (2009), the use of outcomes assessment has both supporters and critics. Some

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believe it has positive implications for student learning and curriculum improvement. Others see it as a bureaucratic activity to satisfy accrediting bodies that typically does not result in additional resources to address curriculum needs and could even be used to penalize a program. There is general agreement, however, that the use of assessment is more than a passing fad (see also Kuh and Ikenberry 2009). Moreover, universities are increasingly requiring that faculty develop learning outcomes at both program and course levels.

In contrast to ASA's initiative to identify learning outcomes for sociology **curricula**, this paper proposes model outcomes for introductory **courses** that link them to the field's mission of improving rural well-being. As elaborated in the next section, most of these courses do not serve formal rural sociology curricula. While no set of model learning outcomes could be universally applied, a shared framework would help focus attention on increasing students' ability to articulate how rural/urban context shapes their personal and professional lives. This would both facilitate student engagement in the classroom and increase the chances that they **apply** rural/urban sensitivity in their lives.

METHODOLOGY

Given that the intention of using model learning outcomes is to provide a shared connection to the field of rural sociology, it was deemed essential that an organizing framework: (1) Be useful to instructors who teach different types of introductory rural sociology courses; and (2) reflect agreement within the field about the significance of rural life in urban, industrialized societies. As described in more detail in the following sections, curricular roles were identified from departmental websites and themes about rural life from recent published works on the field of rural sociology. Sample learning outcomes related to each theme were then drafted by the author and discussed in relation to different kinds of courses.

Curricular Roles of Introductory Rural Sociology

For this note, it was deemed more important to account for common roles of introductory rural sociology courses than to identify all of them. Because identifying a complete population of institutions and departments offering these courses would be logistically difficult, only departments from U.S. universities offering a **graduate** program listed on the RSS website were examined. It was reasoned that the presence of faculty and graduate students with backgrounds and expertise in rural sociology increased the likelihood of offering an undergraduate course.

For each department listed on the website, courses and their curricular roles were identified from undergraduate program descriptions and university catalogs. Syllabi were downloaded when available. Some were acquired directly from instructors and from the ASA's syllabi set for Rural Sociology (Jenkins and Rakowski 2000), but no attempt was made to gather all of them. This revealed two common forms of introductory rural sociology: Lower-level courses that are often cross-listed with introductory sociology and serve general education curricula, and upper-level courses that serve as elective offerings for sociology and related majors. Of the 26 universities examined, nine offered lower-level rural sociology courses,³ 10 offered upper-level electives,⁴ two offered courses serving students in agriculture-related majors, and five did not offer introductory rural sociology.

The lower-level courses attract students with varied backgrounds and interests. The fact that they are often cross-listed with introductory sociology raises a central question about the organizing focus of the course. As discussed in Lobao (2007), some view rural sociology as a subfield of sociology and others as a distinct discipline with its own specialty areas. A perusal of syllabi demonstrates that some instructors approach "Introduction to Rural Sociology" as an overview of topics related to the well-being of rural people and places, teaching sociological concepts through their application to rural issues. Examples of chosen readings include Flora and Flora (2008), Brown and Swanson (2003), topic-specific books, and/or selected readings.

Others approach the course as an overview of basic sociological theories and concepts with special attention to unique features of rural life and social organization. These instructors often use general sociology textbooks, though it has been recognized that such texts typically give little attention to rural life (cf., Jenkins 2007). Some supplement or replace these textbooks with selected readings.

³These included: RSOC 110 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, SOC 130 at Iowa State University, CLD 102 at the University of Kentucky, RS 1000 at the University of Missouri, SOC 241 at North Carolina State University, RS 105 at Ohio State University, RS 111 at Pennsylvania State University, SOC 240 at South Dakota State University, and RS 140 at the University of Wisconsin.

⁴These included: SOC 341 at Colorado State University, DSOC 3360 at Cornell University, SOCIO 532 at Kansas State University, SOCL 2351 at Louisiana State University, SOC 363 at Michigan State University, SOC 3302 at Mississippi State University, SOC 311 at the University of North Dakota, SOC 475 at Oregon State University, SOC 376 at Sam Houston State University, and SOC 3610 at Utah State University. The author's home institution, though not included on the RSS website, could be added to this list.

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Whatever the organizing focus, the vitality of these courses is dependent upon their ability to engage students who have no necessary familiarity with or interest in rural life (cf., Donnermeyer et al. 2005). This calls for highlighting practical connections to students' lives. Duncan (1945) made a similar point decades ago as he articulated concerns about teaching rural sociology in the postwar era. He argued that "the general nontechnical course will be beneficial to the prospective sociologist, while the typical technical course virtually extinguishes the life of the student with only a layman's interest in the subject" (Duncan 1945:138).

"Introductory" rural sociology courses that serve as upper-level electives for sociology and related majors have titles such as "The Sociology of Rural Life" or simply "Rural Sociology." Students may have previously taken introductory sociology, but have likely had limited exposure to rural/urban variation in social life. It cannot be assumed that students in these courses are necessarily more familiar with or interested in rural issues than are general education students, and the same concerns about engagement apply. However, there exists greater opportunity for drawing connections to students' substantive interests in social inequality, population and development, environmental sociology, and other sociological specialty areas.

In sum, this examination of curricular roles revealed that a set of model learning outcomes must make apparent connections to students' lives and (even if organized around a distinctly rural sociological framework) to a variety of general sociological theories and concepts at both introductory and more advanced levels. Attention is now turned to the framework itself.

The Significance of Rural/Urban Context

To identify core areas of agreement about the significance of "rural" in urban, industrialized societies, recent research-based summaries of the field were examined. These included the introduction to a policy-oriented textbook (Brown and Swanson 2003), encyclopedia entry (Lobao 2007), and Presidential address (Krannich 2008). The first two sources were considered particularly appropriate because they were efforts to articulate the significance of rural sociology to potentially unfamiliar readers (as most students are when entering introductory courses). Although Krannich (2008) addressed RSS members, he too referred to themes about the significance of rural. Other recent works on the status of rural sociology were examined (Beaulieu 2005; Falk and Lyson 2007), but were not utilized because they focused more on strategies for increasing relevancy than on underlying rationales for attention to rural life, per se.

Themes that were present in at least two of the three sources were identified. They were drawn from discrete sections of the writings that focused directly on the question at hand: “Why do rural people and areas merit special attention in the twenty-first century?” (Brown and Swanson 2003:1-2), “Can rural sociology remain relevant in the face of declining rural population?” (Lobao 2007:474), and the introduction to “So where do we go from here?” (Krannich 2008:13). Themes included:

1. Perceptions of rural and urban have real social consequences:
 - “Rural people and communities merit special attention because Americans generally accord them a value that far exceeds their material contribution to the nation’s growth and well-being. The American public often sees its rural population as a repository of almost sacred values and a stable anchor during times of rapid social change” (Brown and Swanson 2003:1).
 - “Deeply rooted societal ideals about “rurality” and the attractions associated with rural landscapes continue to influence public opinion, recreation and tourism patterns, migration behaviors, and political decisions in the United States and other advanced industrial societies. Even where “rural society” has waned, rural remains an important ‘category of thought’” Krannich (2008:13).
 - “People believe ‘rural’ social life and settings to be real and act on this belief. For example, families and corporations make decisions about moving into rural locations on the basis of their preconceived views about these places” Lobao (2007:474).
2. Rural-urban variations exist in social experiences and conditions:
 - “The rural/urban gap in quality of life, by most measures, has diminished significantly in recent decades, but rural areas still lag behind their urban counterparts” (Brown and Swanson 2003:2).
 - “There are numerous, objective indicators that continue to differentiate people and places by degree of rurality: poverty rates, employment opportunities, educational attainments, access to health care, local government resources, and so forth. The 2000 and 2004 presidential elections are a powerful reminder of these continuing differences” (Lobao 2007:474).
3. The well-being of the nation depends on rural well-being:
 - “Energy, metals, water, soil, timber, wildlife habitat, open space, and attractive viewscapes are all primarily rural resources. America’s future

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depends on the prudent use and conservation of this rural-based natural endowment. Suffice it to say, society and natural resources are mutually interrelated. The long-term sustainability of the nation's natural resource base affects and is affected by its institutions and social organization" (Brown and Swanson 2003:1).

- "Rural places and populations remain at the center of an international agricultural industry that has evolved into a complex, hierarchical world food system that has important implications for the health and security of rural and urban people across the globe" Krannich (2008:13).

These themes are elaborated in the next section along with sample learning outcomes.

SAMPLE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Theme 1: Perceptions of "Rural" and "Urban" Have Real Social Consequences

This theme addresses the importance of perceptions about rural and urban life, regardless of their "validity." Topics include popular images and stereotypes and "rural" as a source of identity and symbolic value. These topics have value in both types of introductory courses and lend themselves to engaging many students. They could be readily linked to coverage of the symbolic interaction paradigm and the social construction of reality, or incorporated with broader treatment of culture, socialization, and social stratification. Sample learning outcomes include:

- Recognize rural and urban images and stereotypes (both positive and negative) in popular discourse and describe how they are used
- Bring evidence to bear on a misperception about rural life
- Recognize situations in which "rural" and "urban" are invoked as sources of identity by individuals or communities
- Describe and provide examples of rural influence in American political culture
- Describe how policymakers' perceptions of rural conditions may influence their approaches to rural development

While most of these topics relate to sensitizing students to rural-urban imagery and its significance more than increasing their knowledge about particular aspects of rural life, addressing misperceptions about rural life clearly requires evidence. Since images and stereotypes are expressed in many forms, a variety of instructional materials may be used. These include but are not limited to newspaper articles, local

“booster” materials, literature, popular music, and film clips. Some newspaper articles address topics of rural imagery directly (for example, analyses of how rural mythology was invoked in the 2008 Presidential election campaign), while other articles demonstrate unconscious rural or urban biases. Attainment of learning outcomes could be measured by students’ ability to recognize such imagery when presented with new examples and discuss its implications.

Theme 2: Rural-Urban Variations Exist in Social Experiences and Conditions

This broad theme encompasses a variety of topics. These include conceptualizing and measuring rural and urban and its influences on social life and social organization, rural/urban population and economic changes, and challenges of rural and community development. While the first is relevant to both types of introductory courses, regardless of organizing focus, the population and development topics are most directly applicable to those organized around rural well-being and particularly to upper-level courses.

Sample learning outcomes on conceptualizing and measuring rural-urban and its influences on social life and social organization:

- Identify ways that social life in rural and urban places has become more similar over time, and identify the forces of change
- Identify and describe socializing influences of the type of locality in which one grows up
- Describe the relevance of rural/urban context to various academic majors (drawing from students’ interests in criminology, social work, geography, etc.) and related careers
- Describe how national institutions such as health care and education differentially affect rural and urban localities
- Distinguish rural-urban from regional, place-specific influences on social life
- Describe the bases of rural/urban and non-metro/metro classifications and the limitations of these measures for studying social life

In teaching these topics, it is clearly important to stress that social phenomena do not neatly vary along a rural-urban continuum and that rural areas are not monolithic. Some teaching materials are organized around the latter point, calling attention to diversities within and among rural areas (cf., Jenkins and Rakowski 2000). On the other hand, unless complemented with attention to common features of rural life, that approach could be misinterpreted as treating rural sociology

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merely as the study of social life in rural settings. Rural sociologists are interested in these settings **because** many social phenomena operate differently there due to the influence of spatial and cultural factors.

Attainment of these outcomes could be measured using traditional quiz/exam scores, students' ability to interpret maps showing geographic variation in social phenomena (with an emphasis on describing rural/urban and regional patterns and framing questions about what might explain those patterns), and reflective essays on the significance of rural/urban context to their personal and professional lives.

Sample learning outcomes on population and economic changes and the challenges of rural and community development:

- Describe how the non-metro population and economy has changed over time, and factors that distinguish growing counties from declining ones
- Describe similarities, differences, and linkages between the economic bases of non-metro and metro areas today
- Provide examples of economic activities with rural growth potential and describe relationships with education/training and natural resource preservation and use
- Discuss opportunities and challenges that globalization presents for rural development
- Distinguish community development from economic development, and identify the conditions under which the latter is most likely to improve local well-being
- Identify institutions and organizational structures that facilitate and impede community development and action

For courses serving as upper-level electives, decisions about emphasizing particular topics must be considered in relation to other curricular offerings. For example, as there is no longer a separate course on "community" in the author's department of affiliation, but community development is given a great deal of attention in the rural course. As there is a course related to international development, the rural course takes a predominantly domestic focus.

Case studies are particularly helpful for teaching about local interaction processes and enable students to connect course material to real-world situations. Where feasible, efforts to engage with community-based projects (cf., Marullo and Strand 2004) could further strengthen such connections. Students' ability to interpret case studies provided to them or to analyze a local community may complement exam scores as measures of student learning.

Theme 3 – National Well-Being Depends on Rural Well-Being

Though related to the previous theme, this one focuses more directly on “the case for rural development.” Topics include: Rural-urban migration patterns and demands on the rural land and resource base. These topics are most relevant to courses with a rural sociological focus, but could be incorporated with coverage of population and environment if using a general sociology frame. Sample learning outcomes include:

- Describe the causes and impacts of urban sprawl from a national perspective
- Describe implications of the agrifood system for the environment and consumers
- Discuss the rural development implications of energy and climate change policies
- Discuss the significance of community development for successfully addressing situations in which national interests may conflict with local needs (such as restricting timber harvesting on national forests to address ecological concerns or selecting locations for waste facilities)
- Identify the connections between rural poverty and environmental degradation and provide examples
- Describe the social and environmental impacts of rural to urban migration in rapidly-developing societies

For upper-level electives, decisions about what to emphasize must take into account other courses in the curriculum related to environment and development. For example, a rural course with a unit focused on problems of resource preservation and use could complement an environmental sociology course focused on the macro-level causes and outcomes of environmental degradation (cf., Field, Luloff, and Krannich 2002). Measures of student learning may include both exam scores and case study analyses.

CONCLUSION

This note is a call for greater attention to what we teach in introductory rural sociology. As so many of these courses are not part of a rural sociology curriculum, the existence of a framework for sharing professional expectations would help ensure that research findings about the enduring significance of “rural” are translated into the classroom. It would be impossible and arguably undesirable to develop a set of model learning outcomes that could be universally applied, as the

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goals of any particular course reflect a unique combination of its curricular roles and the backgrounds/interests of students who enroll. Yet a shared framework would help focus attention on increasing students' ability to articulate how rural/urban context shapes their personal and professional lives. Heightened awareness is clearly not a sufficient condition for realizing tangible improvements in rural well-being, but it is a necessary one.

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