

## **RURAL SOCIOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Rural sociology is a unique field. Woven into its development are attributes that many sociologists now recognize as central to disciplinary advancement. These attributes include a tradition of cross-disciplinary linkages, strong public policy influence, concern with social justice and public sociology, and interest in geographic space. Another unique feature is that rural sociology's institutional development leaves it perhaps the most independent of all sociological subfields. In fact, some analysts see it as a distinct discipline.

In this chapter, I trace rural sociology's development, discuss the resulting knowledge base, and consider its future prospects. The substantive scope of rural sociology is large and varied. One way to understand the field is through the lens of geographic space. Attention to social life outside the spatial settings conventionally studied in sociology is the central element linking the diverse concerns of rural sociologists.

### **ORIGINS OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY**

The roots of rural sociology are firmly tied to U.S. historical events and policy interventions. As Bertrand (1982:xi) notes, rural sociology "has the distinction of being a truly American invention." The institutional infrastructure for establishing rural sociology was formed with the Morrill Land-Grant Act signed by President Lincoln in 1862. The Act set aside federal land in each state to build public colleges for the study of "agriculture and the mechanical arts," to extend the university system beyond elite private or religiously based institutions. Related legislation added other components. Research infrastructure, including access to federal funding

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pipelines, was established through the Agricultural Experiment Stations created in each state by the Hatch Act of 1887. Public outreach—bringing academic research directly into public use—was institutionalized through the Cooperative Extension Service, created by the Smith Lever Act of 1914. The Second Morrill Act of 1890 created 17 historically black land-grant colleges, and in 1994, 29 Native American tribal colleges were given land-grant status. Today, 105 land-grant institutions award one-third of all U.S. bachelors' degrees and 60% of all doctorates (Jischke 2004:3). This mix of public infrastructure is important not only in how rural sociology emerged, but in how it operates as a field of study and profession today.

In the first decade of the last century, over a third of the U.S. population lived on farms, making them a key constituency for social movements and politicians. Farmers were also a strategic population for broader national interests. Cheap food was important for the profitability of large agribusiness interests and for urban employers who wanted to keep workers' wages low. Further, a low cost, steady supply of food was critical to the nation's capacity to make war, of escalating concern given Europe's engagement in World War I. As new immigrants swelled U.S. cities, domestic outmigration from rural to urban areas was thought to exacerbate urban social problems. Thus, there was federal interest in keeping farmers on the land even as farm families themselves continued to outmigrate from rural areas.

Rural sociology was born into this era of concern with farm families and federal goal of stemming rural outmigration. Its origins are usually traced to the creation of the County Life Commission in 1908 by President Theodore Roosevelt (Bertrand 1982; Hooks and Flinn 1981). The Commission launched a nationwide investigation documenting the difficulties faced by farm families. It conducted surveys of farm families and compiled other information, leading to a report which formed the basis for subsequent national policy. The Commission downplayed structural determinants of farmers' hardships (Hooks and Flinn 1989). Instead, it focused on individuals' human capital, cultural values, and weaknesses of rural schools and churches. Upgrading rural peoples' presumed social deficits was thus emphasized over addressing fundamental inequalities in power and economic resources.

In the wake of this widespread public attention, sociologists became increasingly interested in rural people, taking a social-problems approach that differed from the discipline's standard social-philosophical approach. Bertrand (1982:xi) notes, they "called themselves rural sociologists and defined their professional effort as the development and application of concepts and theoretical models for the express purpose of improving the life and well-being of rural people." The first course in rural sociology was taught at the University of Chicago in 1894 (Nelson 1969:32). The first text, John Gillette's *Constructive Rural Sociology*, was published in 1913 (Olsen 199:1). Broad recognition of the new field was conferred when George Vincent was elected president of the ASA (then called the American Sociological Society). He selected "The Sociology of Rural Life" as the focus of the annual meeting held in Columbus Ohio in 1916 (Hooks and Flinn 1981:98). In 1922, the Rural Section was established (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:2). It was the ASA's first section (Goudy 2005:24).

Meanwhile, within the nation's land grant university system, rural sociology was further institutionalized. Rural sociology was formally recognized as a separate field of study with the passage of the Purnell Act in 1925 (Goudy 2005:25), which provided federal funds to support rural sociological research, teaching, and outreach (Rogers et al 1988:18). The Act itself grew out of concern with the agricultural depression, which began in the 1920s, a sharp contrast with urban America's boom (Stanton 1991:3).

Government funding lines provided an institutional home for rural sociology within the agricultural colleges where mainly biologically-related disciplines were located. Thus, rural sociology was pulled into an academic milieu more interdisciplinary but also increasingly segmented from its parent discipline. Some universities created separate departments of rural sociology, the first at Cornell in 1915 (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:13). Others housed rural sociologists with other sociologists in single departments, but with faculty sorted by appointment into two different colleges, agriculture (for the rural sociologists) and liberal arts/sciences (for general sociologists). Finally, rural sociologists were housed in multidisciplinary departments within colleges of agriculture. Individual rural sociologists and sometimes entire rural sociology

programs were placed in human ecology departments or in joint units with agricultural education. However, joint departments with agricultural economics, the second social science established by the Purnell Act, were the most common arrangement. Agricultural economists claimed the farm economy as their area of expertise. While early rural sociologists were concerned with farming, the academic division of labor left them to focus more on the residual, non-farm aspects of rural life, such as settlement patterns, social organization, and well-being. It was not until agricultural restructuring of the 1970s that rural sociologists returned more to the study of the farm economy. The academic division of labor seen in distinct departmental arrangements and funding lines for

positions provided via colleges of agriculture continues to this day, and particularly differentiates rural sociology from general sociology.

As a result of this diverse system of institutional supports, early rural sociologists had their professional footing in several doors-- the land-grant universities, federal government, and the ASA. Examples are seen in the careers of two of rural sociology's founders, Charles Galpin and Carl Taylor. Both were heads of the USDA's Division of Farm Population and Life, Bureau of Economic Analysis and actively promoted rural sociological research (Stanton 1991:5). Galpin was elected vice-president of the ASA in 1932 and published along with two leading sociologists, Pitirim Sorokin and Carle Zimmerman, the three volume *A Systematic Source Book in Rural Sociology* (Larson and Zimmerman 2003). Taylor was elected president of the RSS (Rural Sociological Society) in 1939 and president of the ASA in 1946 (Larson and Zimmerman 2003). These and other early rural sociologists' social justice interests in farm laborers and other marginalized populations often put them at odds with vested interests. Taylor, for example, in challenging segregationist practices saw his university position abolished by the Board of Trustees at North Carolina State (Larson and Zimmerman 2003:27).

With expanding interest in the field, the Rural Section in ASA decided to publish its own journal, *Rural Sociology*. The first issue appeared in 1936. In December 1937, the Rural Section went further, voting to establish a separate professional organization, the Rural Sociological Society (RSS). The separation occurred because rural sociology had grown large and varied and some felt limited by ASA (Nelson 1969:130-131). While most members of the Rural Section were college sociologists, the field interested agricultural and home economists and staff of farm and government organizations. Some were concerned prospective interest in rural sociology would dampen since those having no desire to join ASA were required to be ASA members. Further, participation at ASA meetings was limited to one paper, tending to restrict involvement into a single section. With a new society, members retained a primary focus on rural sociology, but were freer to present papers and join ASA sections. The organizational split signaled that rural sociologists saw themselves as occupying a separate field, with speciality

areas within it, not simply as a speciality area within sociology. In 1938, membership in RSS stood at 206 but rose steadily. In 1966, it reached 840 (Nelson 1969:133), hovering to around 1000 since then.

### **DISTINCT ATTRIBUTES OF THE FIELD**

The founding of rural sociology set in place a series of defining attributes and axes of tension that have influenced its subsequent development, including the contemporary work of rural sociologists. One attribute pervading rural sociology from its inception is a focus on settings where development has played out unevenly and tended to leave people and places in more marginal positions. Elsewhere, I have argued that rural sociology is a sociology of the geographic periphery (Lobao 1996). That is, rural sociologists focus on the places and populations with the least resources and the greatest social structural impediments to higher incomes, employment, and access to state social provisions. These settings vary from the advanced industrialized and urban areas conventionally studied by sociologists. Thus, there is a stable thread upon the types of places upon which rural sociologists have always focused: rural areas within developed nations; and as rural sociology later progressed, the developing nations of the globe with large, rural, and agriculturally dependent populations.

A second attribute early established was a varied substantive focus, with periodic tensions as to the saliency of certain topics. As noted above, as the academic division of labor evolved, rural

sociologists moved away from attention to agriculture, toward general topics such as family, community, and settlement patterns. Further, since rural sociology began as a field spanning sociology's body of knowledge, it incorporated basically the same substantive content as general sociology, thus making for an array of specialities within it. For example, specialities include "rural crime," "rural health," "rural women," the "rural family," and so forth. Of the current, thirteen substantively-oriented interest group sections within RSS, all but the sociology of agriculture have counterpart sections within the ASA.

Given the varied topics studied, periodic tension has emerged over whether rural sociology has a defining substantive focus. Much of this tension has involved the saliency of attention to agriculture and the broader rural economy versus attention to non-agricultural or non-economic aspects of rural life. When many rural sociologists re-embraced the study of agriculture in the 1970s period onward, there were calls to view the sociology of agriculture as the defining focus of the "new rural sociology" (Friedland 1991; Newby 1983). Attention to the broader rural economy developed in the 1980s and 1990s, with rural restructuring epitomizing the "new rural sociology" of that period (Falk 1996; Tickamyer 1996). More recently, a view that much rural sociological research can be captured under the banner of spatial inequality has been offered (Lobao and Saenz 2002; Lobao 2004). In this view, seemingly disparate traditions within rural sociology, such as those on rural economic structure, inequality research, as well as agricultural and environmental sociology, are seen as linked through their attention to geographic space.

A third attribute early established is interest in applied research, often aimed at pressing social issues and involving direct outreach to rural people. This has sometimes created tension between those advocating the importance of applied work and those who view the field as

lacking theoretical robustness (Sewell 1965). In reality, of course, the applied-basic division with regard to any research question may be virtually seamless. And contemporary rural sociologists tend to see their field as strengthened by giving weight to both. The point is, however, tension about whether the field is overly applied has been discussed for many decades (Falk 1996; Ford 1985; Sewell 1965).

A fourth attribute is that rural sociologists typically navigate between established, often elite-stakeholders and broader public interests. Although the institutional setting of rural sociology provides access to added federal and state support, it comes with strings attached. Rural sociologists are subject to organizational pressures not typical for other sociologists (Friedland 1982; Sewell 1965). A primary goal of colleges of agriculture is to serve clientele beyond students. While this once included most rural people, today's clientele are narrower interest groups, many outside direct farming, such as agribusiness corporations. While agricultural economists largely embraced catering to agribusiness interests, rural sociologists, by and large remained faithful to their roots. They have always taken as their clientele the rural poor, minorities, small farmers, and the public at large. Sometimes this focus has come at the expense of their own careers, when their research or outreach efforts challenged elite interests.

Fifth, rural sociology has always been interdisciplinary-oriented. This stems partly from its subject material, which being varied and attending to ecological aspects of social life, connects it to other disciplines, including the biological sciences. It also stems from the field's institutional location in land grant universities. Here rural sociologists often work on multidisciplinary research teams and are housed in units with other disciplines. Addressing applied social issues also calls for interdisciplinary approaches.

Sixth, rural sociology has always had a strong public policy presence. Rural sociologists have directed major federal agencies, routinely testified before Congress, and contributed to major legislation, including federal farm bills. Decennial volumes edited by the presidents of the Rural Sociological Society are produced to highlight key public policy issues in the coming

decade for government officials as well as for social scientists (Brown and Swanson 2003; Dillman and Hobbs 1982; Flora and Christenson 1991).

Finally, given its distinct institutional status, early separation from the ASA, and broad substantive focus, perhaps the field's capstone tension is captured in the question: to what degree is rural sociology different from general sociology? This perennial question has engendered a range of answers. Books on the field characterize it as an independent discipline (Bertrand 1969: vi; Stanton 1991:1). As such, since its founding, some have viewed rural sociology as more allied with agricultural economics than with sociology (Olsen 1991). Nelson (1969:130) takes a middle point, arguing that it is an "enclave" within sociology, "not a truly specialized field of interest comparable to the family, population, methodology, or the community..[but] as broad in its content as sociology itself." Others see little difference from the parent discipline. John Gillette, author of the first textbook on rural sociology noted in 1916 "...it has been said of rural sociology, 'There ain't no such animal.' It is asserted that there is but one sociology, and that is the general science of sociology..." (Nelson 1969: 35). More recently, Falk (1996: 164) notes: "Rural sociologists are simply general sociologists who have a particular focus in their work...things rural always play some part in what we do."

Tension about the disciplinary status of rural sociology is not merely ontological but has real outcomes for practice of the profession. Professional identity as a separate or part of sociology figures in job searches, grant competitions, and journal article submissions. Within the RSS, debates repeatedly occur over the location of annual meetings, with those--based on professional identity--arguing for or against annual meeting locations close to ASA.

The issues and tensions above often appear as new to each succeeding generation of rural sociologists. Yet they were built early into the field. Rural sociologists are remarkably introspective about these issues. This relatively small field has generated numerous articles taking stock of its disciplinary status, strengths, and shortcomings. Keeping in mind the issues noted above continually pervade rural sociology, I provide an overview of research in the early

stages of the field, then focus in more detail on the contemporary knowledge base. My discussion centers on U.S. generated literatures, which continue to form the bulk of the work

### **RURAL SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH: THE FIRST FIVE DECADES**

The substantive focus, theory, and methodological approaches of rural sociological research in its first fifty years are captured in a number of review articles. Two companion articles delineate substantive foci of research. Sewell (1965) takes stock of three eras: the Depression and World War II (1936-1945) and the early (1946-1955) and late Post-War periods (1956-1965). Christenson and Garkovich (1985) focus on 1966-1985. Both studies examine articles published in *Rural Sociology* and use the same categories to classify research topics. The substantive categories delineated are: social organization (including family, education, religion, stratification, community); social change; social psychology; population; social welfare and policy; methodology; and issues related to the profession. In the list of topics, little appears to differentiate the field from general sociology. However, distinctiveness remains in the application of these topics to the rural population, a segment the parent discipline neglected as it assumed urban-based mass society was to wash over all people.

The importance of the topics above ebbs and flows with the decades, appearing to follow both trends in general sociology as well as rural sociologists' interests in the social problems of rural people. Interest in social welfare and policy (a category which includes housing, level of living, poverty, minorities, and social problems) peaks during the Depression, with about one-third of *Rural Sociology* articles attending to that topic. Concern with the conditions of farm labor also peaks during the Depression era (Sewell 1965:433), with a small uptake occurring in the late 1970s (Christenson and Garkovich 1985). Topics addressing social psychology exhibit consistent growth. While interest in social psychology followed general disciplinary trends, it also reflected growing research on the diffusion of innovations, a topic which gave rural sociologists a key niche in agricultural colleges. This body of work was directed to assessing individuals' attitudes and behaviors related to adoption of agricultural technologies produced in the Post-War II period (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971). Much of this work was later highly

critical of the inequality-producing effects of these technologies. Finally, topics involving social organization and population (largely urban-rural trends) remained consistent topics of research throughout the entire fifty-year period. In the last decade (1976-1985) studied, Christenson and Garkovich (1985:512) report that the four major topical areas, with their respective proportion of articles produced, were social psychology (31%), social organization (24%), population (12%) and social change (11%).

Theoretical approaches are also addressed in review articles. Companion pieces by Picou et al. (1978) and Falk and Zhao (1989) focus, respectively, on the 1965-1976 and 1976-1985 periods. Sewell (1965) addresses the 1936-1965 period. All analyze articles published in *Rural Sociology*. They report rural sociological research is generally more applied and less theoretical than general sociology. Paradigmatic stance was largely “social facts” (e.g. deductive traditions ranging from functionalism to Marxism) with 92% of articles taking this stance from 1965-1976 and 76% from 1976-1985 (Falk and Zhao 1989: 591). Articles in the social definition (e.g. Meadian tradition) paradigm comprised 6% of those published from 1965-1976 and 9% from 1976-1985, while articles classified as a “mixed” paradigmatic perspective comprised 1% of those published from 1965-1976 and 14% from 1976-1985 (Falk and Zhao 1989: 591). In terms of specific theories, rural sociologists appear to follow the parent discipline. For example, Falk and Zhao (1989) note the rise of Neo-Marxian approaches in rural sociology in the late 1970s.

Reviews assessing research methodology are found in Sewell (1965), Stokes and Miller (1985), and Falk and Zhao (1989). These authors indicate early work tended to be descriptive and centered on local populations to which rural sociologist had easy access. As the field evolved, methodology became more rigorous and quantitative. The vast majority of articles published in *Rural Sociology* from 1936-1985 used primary data from surveys and secondary data, with surveys the most common (Stokes and Miller 1985). While individuals thus were mainly the unit of observation, there was continual interest in geographic space. About 30% of articles produced between 1936-1985 used ecological units as the unit of observation.

U.S. rural sociology led to field's growth elsewhere. The European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS) was established in 1957. Christenson and Garkovich (1985) note European rural sociology emerged from liberal arts type settings and tends to be more theoretical and philosophical than U.S. rural sociology. However, they point out differences are also a function of divides between general U.S. and European sociology, the former itself more empirical and quantitative. RSS and ESRS joined in efforts to create the International Rural Sociological Association (IRSA) established in 1966. In 1969, the Latin American Rural Sociological Association was formed, followed later by the Australia and Oceania Network, and the Asian Rural Sociological Association. All these member societies compose the IRSA today.

### **RURAL SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH: THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD**

While a flurry of articles assessed the status of rural sociology over its first fifty years, the more recent period is met by less systematic scrutiny. Still, edited volumes delineate the substantive scope of research (Brown and Swanson 2003; Goreham 1997; Flora and Christenson 1991) and review articles of specific topics exist (Buttel 2001; Lobao and Meyer 2001). I provide an overview of research, then distinguish substantive bodies of work.

Rural sociology's diverse substantive scope remains in topical areas overlapping with those of general sociology. Research-related interest groups in RSS highlight present diversity: education and work; family and household; community; natural resources; population; health; poverty; policy; racial/ethnic groups; gender; applied/extension sociology; the sociology of agriculture; and until recently, international development. In comparing rural sociology's first fifty years to the 1986-1995 period Garkovich and Bell (1995) report a movement away from research on social psychology and social organization and toward social change and stratification (social welfare and policy), a pattern following general sociology.

With regard to theory, little suggests that previous patterns are altered: rural sociologists build from sociology using theories germane to substantive areas above (Falk 1996). At the same time, they maintain an interest in applied and policy-related research, where conventional sociological theory is less transferable. Within certain substantive areas, rural sociologists have

developed their own theoretical perspectives rather independently from sociology, with these sometimes challenging conventional views of the parent discipline. Such independent theorizing is seen particularly within the sociology of agriculture (Lobao and Meyer 2001).

With regard to methods, rural sociologists follow trends in sociology (Falk 1996). However, the distinct subject matter addressed by rural sociologists, coupled with need for data on specific populations, often means conventional secondary data have limited usefulness (Tickamyer 1996). Rural sociologists thus have to rely perhaps more than other sociologists on independent data collection activities. Finally, rural sociologists are at the forefront of sociology in their use of spatial analytical methods and geographic information systems (GIS) (Voss et al. 2006).

Below I discuss major branches of contemporary research. Rural sociologists are leading contributors to research on community, environmental sociology, and international development. As these fields are addressed elsewhere in this volume, I give particular attention to the sociology of agriculture and rural inequality research, areas more unique to rural sociology. It should be noted that any research area is porous, individual researchers straddle areas below.

### **The Sociology of Agriculture**

The sociology of agriculture focuses on an economic sector which general sociology has long neglected. Its theoretical orientation also developed quite independently from the parent discipline. A recent review of much of this work is found in Lobao and Meyer (2001). As noted above, in the late 1970s rural sociologists recognized massive changes occurring in farming and turned to critical, political economic analysis of that sector. Seminal publications documenting this turn include Buttel and Newby (1980), Newby (1983), Friedland et al. (1991). Several overlapping topics have occupied researchers: agricultural change, including development of local and global food systems; effects of agricultural change on communities, families and women; and issues of agricultural science, technology, and sustainable agriculture.

*Farming and Agri-Food Systems.* In contemporary research, three types of agricultural change have been of particular interest. First are changes in the demography of farming, seen in the declining number of farms and farm population (Albrecht and Murdock 1990). Rural

sociologists historically addressed this topic as a broad, national issue. More recent focus is on the sustainability of farming in particular localized settings at the urban-rural interface, or where large metro areas meet the countryside (Jackson-Smith 2003; Salamon 2002).

The second change entails farm structure and the relative growth of “industrialized farms” and decline of family or moderate-size farms. Persistence of family farming and the form it takes as capitalism advances is debated (Mann 1990). Since the late 1990s, particular attention has been given to the industrializing of livestock production (Thu and Durrenberger 1998).

Finally, rural sociologists move beyond the farm gate to study agro-food systems at the global and local scale. This research also moves beyond focus on production aspects of agriculture to consumption (Fine 2004; Goodman 2002). The global commodity chains literature connects capital, labor, and resources needed in different stages of the production process to geographic regions; and it considers how global commodity production/consumption markets are created through state and macro-economic processes (Bonanno et al. 1994; Friedland 2001; Friedland et al. 1981). A similar topic is addressed at the local scale: researchers are interested in networks among farmers, consumers, processors, and retailers, and how these might sustain local food systems (Allen 2004; Lyson 2004). Rural sociologists not only study local food systems, but facilitate their development through outreach programs.

For researchers studying the three changes above, conventional theories from economic sociology are of limited use, since they miss the path of development of agriculture. Researchers draw from and extend critical, Marxist oriented frameworks and more recently, post-modern, actor-network, and civic society perspectives to theorize these changes.

***Farm Communities and Families.*** Another body of work centers on the impacts of farm change on communities and households. Walter Goldschmidt’s research (1978) catapulted interest in the topic of farming and communities. His case-study of two California towns originally conducted in the 1930s found large scale, industrialized farms (as compared to smaller, family farms) had detrimental impacts on community well-being. From the 1970s onward, rural sociologists have tested variants of this finding, known as the “Goldschmidt

hypothesis.” Numerous subsequent studies, conducted across the nation at different time periods support aspects of this hypothesis, but often with qualification. For reviews, see Lobao (1990) and Swanson (1988). This research shows that even in a post-industrial economy, farming affects community well-being, though certainly not as much as non-farm industries. Further, family farming appears to be a marker of a strong local civic society (Lyson 2004; Tolbert et al. 1998). Research on the topic continues to evolve in accordance with changes in farming. Since the 1990s, analysts have turned to industrialization of the livestock farming and its impacts on communities’ economic, social, and environmental conditions (Thu and Durrenberger 1998). Research in this area has been used for policy and public sociology purposes. A recent example is South Dakota’s constitutional amendment regulating absentee-owned corporate farms, where rural sociologists’ research showing potential detrimental community effects of such farms was used in federal court cases in 2001-2003.

Rural sociologists also examine the more micro-impacts of agricultural change on the household, including gender roles (see Lobao and Meyer 2001). While this topic always interested rural sociologists, it took on renewed interest in the 1980s-1990s with the lingering farm crisis (Lasley et al. 1995). Researchers examined household survival strategies, again arguing that general sociology’s focus on urban populations made invisible the spectrum of work and survival strategies utilized by rural people (Sachs 1996; Tickamyer 1996). The gender division of labor was studied (Barlett 1993; Lobao and Meyer 1995). While researchers expected the gender division of labor to shift, with women performing more work in direct farming, this did not appear to occur in the wake of financial hardship. Emotional well-being of farm men and women was related to financial hardship (Ramirez-Ferrero 2005). Researchers also studied family resiliency. Elder and Conger (2000) documented that farm life for children had beneficial effects on their emotional health and educational attainments, despite financial hardship.

***Agricultural Sciences and Technology.*** A third research area centers on agricultural sciences and technology. Research on adoption-diffusion of agricultural technologies has long been a

part of rural sociology, although this tradition waned in the post-1970s. It was resurrected in the 1990s as sociologists studied the new wave of biotechnologies in crops such as corn, cotton, and soybeans and in dairying (Buttel 1997). In contrast to earlier work, current rural sociologists take a more critical stance in analyzing why certain technologies and products come into use and the risks they may pose to society (Busch et al. 1991; DuPuis 2002; Molnar and Kinnucan 1989). Focus has also turned to indigenous knowledge about farm technologies and practices. Here researchers are concerned with sustaining local knowledge about farming and how this knowledge can be harnessed to create a more sustainable, socially-just system (Bell 2004).

### **Rural Inequality Research**

Rural sociology contains a large body of research on stratification grounded in different literatures. These literatures overlap substantively and conceptually, comprising a general inequality tradition. Much of the work explores comparative urban-rural differences in economic opportunities and other life chances for various social groups. In that sense, it is concerned with spatial inequality at the subnational or regional scale (Lobao 2004). This research is a unique contribution to sociology for two reasons: until recently, sociologists studying stratification largely neglected “space;” and when space was brought in to study stratification, it was typically at the scale of the city and neighborhood or conversely, at the cross-national scale. Rural sociology’s middle, subnational scale of focus distinguishes it from other sociological fields. This research often employs counties, labor market areas, or regions either as units of analysis directly or as multilevel measures of context surrounding households and individuals. I divide these literatures according to focus on general inequalities, race/ethnicity, and gender.

#### ***General Inequalities: Rural Poverty, Rural Labor Markets, and Demographic Research.***

*Rural Poverty.* A large literature exists on poverty in rural regions, which contrasts with sociology’s urban-poverty literature. Rural poverty rates are historically higher than urban poverty rates, making the topic of particular concern (Jensen et al. 2003). Poverty among working families is also higher in rural areas, indicating deficiencies in rural employment

structures. The Rural Sociological Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty consolidated and pushed forward this work in a seminal 1993 volume. In addition to numerous articles on the topic, books include Billings and Blee (2005), Duncan (1999), Fitchen (1991), and Lyson and Falk (1993). Much of this literature focuses on persistently poor rural regions. Conceptual approaches also exist to understand general subnational patterns of poverty (Lobao 2004).

*Rural Labor Markets.* This literature represents a unique contribution for it addresses the conceptualization of and empirical issues involved in studying work and inequality at the subnational scale, across urban-rural regions and communities. It addresses how the spatial context of economic structure (industries, firms, and employment) shapes earnings, incomes, and other indicators of well-being (Falk et al. 2003; Singelmann and Deseran 1993). Another innovation is attention to conceptualization and measurement of both “labor markets” and “work” from a rural standpoint. Arguing that conventional labor market areas were too small to capture rural work-residence relationships, Killian and Tolbert (1993) developed ecological units to reflect this new labor market geography, now used widely. Because official statistics often miss work activities of rural people, researchers have turned to conceptualizing and collecting primary data on the informal sector (Falk et al. 2003; Tickamyer 1996). Rural labor markets research challenges traditional neo-classical human capital explanations of inequality. In giving primary attention to structural determinants of inequality, this research shows how economic returns to individuals’ human capital attributes such as education vary by urban-rural context, with rural workers receiving lower returns (Cotter 2002; Tigges and Tootle 1990).

*Sociodemographic Inequalities.* Demographers have a large presence in rural sociology and many study stratification. Their research moves beyond economic inequalities, to address a variety of well-being indicators such as migration, fertility, mortality, and family formation. Demographers also cast a wider net with regard to determinants of inequality, giving attention to both economic structure as well as sociodemographic factors, such as marriage and family structure (Fosset and Seibert 1998; Lichter and McLaughlin 1995). Finally, they point out

complexities in analyzing inequality due to the considerable variation within and between urban-rural regions (Brown and Lee 1999).

Though the three previous literatures remain distinct, there is greater blending of them at present. They all show that economic structure is a main determinant of urban-rural variations in inequality. Rural areas are slower growing, lack employment opportunities, and existing jobs are poorly remunerated. Recent work finds that a weaker civil society (Tolbert et al. 1998, 2002) and local state (Deweese et al. 2003; Tickameyer et al. 2000; Warner and Hebdon 2001) also contribute to poorer well-being. Interest in welfare reform is linking researchers from all three traditions above (Weber et al. 2002; Zimmerman 2002). Due to poorer economic conditions and less local government capacity to administer devolved social programs, rural areas tend to fare worse under welfare reform.

***The Rural Racial/Ethnic Segregation Tradition.*** Rural sociology has a rich tradition addressing racial and ethnic segregation at the regional, sub-national level that sets it apart from sociology's conventional focus on the inner city. Regional patterns of race/ethnic segregation and concentration are examined through attention to Native American reservations, the Southern Black Belt, Mexican American boarder enclaves, and communities with newer ethnic immigration (Falk 2004; Saenz 1997; Snipp 1996; Wimberley and Morris 2002). This literature goes beyond the urban segregation literature in its breadth of territorial scale and depth of historical analysis. Researchers consider how ethnic stratification of regions develops, such as through past political economic forces and public policies which may date back for centuries.

***Rural Gender Inequality.*** Large literatures on rural gender issues have existed since the 1980s. These mainly focus on women's work and well-being (Haney 1997; Tickamyner and Henderson 2003). As feminist and political economy perspectives filtered into rural sociology in the 1980s, the study of farm women's work was elevated to a distinct topical area with explicit theorizing (Sachs 1983, 1996). Rural poverty and labor market researchers also have specific interest in women (Rural Sociological Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty 1993; Tickamyner and Henderson 2003). These researchers address work and socioeconomic inequalities between

rural women and men as well as urban-rural differences between women. Gender segregation across industries and occupations is spatialized, with rural women facing fewer quality employment opportunities than their urban counterparts. Rural women are particularly likely to engage in informal sector activities to piece together family livelihoods. Poverty rates of rural women are higher than those of urban women and there is some evidence rural women fare worse under welfare reform (Ticakmyer and Henderson 2003). Finally, a “rural masculinities” literature is emerging (Bell 2006). While this research tends to be concerned with identity formation and cultural representation, some studies attend to men’s emotional well-being and changing work statuses (Ramirez-Ferrero 2005).

### **Community Studies**

Rural sociology has a strong community tradition overlapping that of urban sociology. A large literature addresses conceptual and methodological issues in defining and studying the rural “community” (see Liepens 2000). Community ethnographies and surveys are common methodologies. Here I discuss four features of rural sociology’s variant of community studies.

First, community settings studied tend to be small, remote, and less affluent, characteristics of rural places nationally. These places typically have limited social, economic, and governmental resources which creates barriers to adapting to changes.

Second, much research centers on the rural community as a social system (Wilkinson 1991) and analyzes the manner by which communities adapt to changes brought about by external economic and social forces. For example, researchers often study industrial restructuring due to globalization and other shifts, with this work providing an important corrective to urban-based industrial restructuring literature (Winson 1997; Anderson 2000). Rural communities tend to be more vulnerable to effects of global competition and trade-policies such as NAFTA in part because of their greater dependence on labor-intensive industries or agricultural products (for example, corn in the case of Mexican communities). They are hard hit by business downturns as they tend to have a less varied industrial mix, fewer options of other employment, poorer quality jobs, and less educated workforce (Anderson 2000). Suburbanization processes and their

impacts have also become a major topic of study (Salamon (2003). Alternatively, some analysts are concerned with communities' resiliency, studying the manner by which social capital networks and other "social infrastructure" allow progressive adaptation to economic and other changes (Flora and Flora 2003; Flora et al. 1997; Luloff and Bridger 2003; Sharp 2001).

Third, rural sociologists also treat the community as a site of social solidarity, place sentiments, and local culture (Bell 1994; Liepens 2000). While past work studying community in this way took a functionalist approach, recent work often blends critical and interpretive perspectives. For example, Falk (2004) examines how a sense of place developed among poor African Americans who lived through pre-Civil rights era segregation in a southern community.

Finally, rural sociologists contribute to community development from the standpoint of research, policy, and practice. Volumes by Brown and Swanson (2003) and Flora and Christenson (1992) contain articles highlighting this work. Green (2003) reviews the research on economic development in small communities. Rural sociologists are well-represented in the Community Development Society, an association of practitioners and researchers.

### **Environment and Natural Resources Sociology**

The study of the environment is central to modern rural sociology. As this large field exists independently and is addressed elsewhere in this volume, I briefly focus on its rural sociological variants. Rural sociologists' contributions to environmental sociology are given detailed discussion by Buttel (1996; 2002) and Field and Burch (1988). They were among the founders of environmental sociology and many leading environmental sociologists are rural sociologists, as seen in research by Buttel (1996), Dunlap et al. (2002), Field and Burch (1988) and Freudenberg and Gramling (1994).

Rural sociologists' research spans three bodies of work, environmental sociology, natural resources sociology, and social impact assessment, with the two latter traditions particular to the field. Buttel (2002) provides an excellent comparison of environmental and natural resources sociology. Natural resources sociology was established as a research group within rural sociology by the mid-1960s, pre-dating general sociology's interest in the environment (Buttel

2002:206). It grew out of the institutional setting of government and colleges of agriculture, tends to focus on communities and regions, and has a more applied focus on policy, resource management, and conflict resolution. By contrast, environmental sociology grew of a liberal arts tradition, focuses more on the nation-state and urban areas, and is often highly theoretical.

Natural resource sociologists are often concerned with the impacts of the extractive sector, particularly mining and forestry in resource-dependent regions in developed and less developed countries. This research tradition treats places, people, and economic sectors that general sociology typically neglects. Populations such as miners, loggers, peasants, indigenous people, and the rural poor are often a focus. Development processes involving the extractive sector work out in different ways than in manufacturing or services, with boom and bust cycles-producing greater swings in economic well-being over time (Bunker 1985; Fruedenberg and Gramling 1994). A related focus is environmental and social impacts of general industrial development processes, such as production of hazardous waste and other pollution (Murdock et al. 1999). In both sets of topics, issues of environmental justice are usually of concern, as poor populations are typically located in more at-risk settings.

Social impact assessment grew out of public policy interest in documenting the impacts of extractive and potentially environmentally degrading industries. This research entails conceptual and methodological approaches for studying these impacts and treats a broad scope of outcome indicators, such as environmental and economic conditions and social problems such as community stress and crime (Burdge 1999; Freudenberg 1986).

### **Other Areas of Research**

Two research areas, rural demography and international development, should be mentioned due to their long history in rural sociology. Rural demographers, in addition to attending to spatial inequalities, have produced a large body of work charting urban-rural differences in settlement patterns and significant national trends in population growth and decline. For example, researchers found a 1970s-decade “nonmetro turnaround” when the rural population grew and net migration from urban to rural areas increased; and a 1980s-decade reversion back

to older, historical trends of net rural to urban migration (Fuguitt et al.1989). The past decade reflects a “rural rebound” or modest growth in the nonmetro population (Johnson and Fuguitt 2000). Demographers are also concerned with developing new Census classifications to tap urban-rural differences in post-industrial economies (Champion and Hugo 2004).

International development has long been a field of study in rural sociology. However, it is probably safe to say that rural sociologists do not compartmentalize this topic as much as general sociologists do. Contemporary rural sociologists tend to have their foot in both U.S. and global research. Most topics discussed previously are examined in both international as well as domestic settings. Any one rural sociologist often has on-going research projects in the U.S. as well as in other nations. Populations of interest to rural sociologists, the rural poor, farmers, and those engaged in natural resource extraction tend to characterize developing nations. Most of the developing world remains rural. Colleges of agriculture have long engaged in international development activities funded by federal agencies and have extensive ties with international universities and governments. Rural sociologists thus are located in institutional setting that give them many opportunities to conduct research across the globe. Attention to peripheral settings globally tends to make rural sociologists recognize and build from both domestic and international literatures addressing theory, research, policy, and public outreach.

Finally, other bodies of research characterize the field. A good view of recent topical issues engaging rural sociologists is provided by Brown’s and Swanson’s edited volume (2003).

## **FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY**

What does the future hold for rural sociology? I consider rural sociology’s distinct niche in sociology, new topics of research, and institutional issues in sustaining the field.

Rural sociology provides a unique window on social life whose importance appears to be increasingly recognized. Attention to spatial dimensions of social life is the central element linking rural sociology’s diverse concerns. Rural sociologists study the people, places, and economic sectors (agriculture and natural resource industries) that characterize spatial settings typically overlooked by general sociologists. Their longstanding interest in exploring urban-

rural variations has led them to focus on a distinct scale of social life –the subnational scale– located between the city and nation state. This spatial scale of focus and related substantive topics of study will continue to create a distinct niche for rural sociology.

In addition, there is reason to think that rural sociology will have broader influence in the future, because topical areas it encompasses are of growing interest to social scientists at large. Over the past decade, there has been widespread sociological interest in spatial aspects of social life. Rural sociologists have long addressed conceptual, substantive, and methodological issues in studying space and their subnational scale of focus has no counterpart elsewhere in sociology. As sociology becomes further spatialized, visibility of rural sociological research is bound to increase. Interest in space also is connecting rural sociology to disciplines such as geography and regional science. Researchers from these disciplines increasingly attend each other's meetings and participate in broad initiatives to spatially-integrate the social sciences.

Similarly, rural sociologists are at the forefront of research addressing other issues of rising concern to sociologists. For some time, they have studied consumption issues, largely through research on the food system and more recently, on use-aspects of rural landscapes. They have also long studied treatment of animals and farm animal welfare. Consumption studies is an emerging research area in sociology, and "Animals and Society" is the ASA's newest section at this time. Buttel (2002) also sees rural sociology's natural resource tradition as increasingly relevant to broader environmental sociology. This tradition has amassed a wealth of empirical studies on places, populations, and environmental practices that can inform and move forward the more abstract, national and urban-oriented environmental literature.

Within branches of research discussed earlier, a few examples of topical areas that should continue to engage rural sociologists may be noted. The study of spatial inequality appears to be growing, as rural sociologists increasingly address work-inequality issues from a comparative spatial vantage. Further, the topic bridges a number of speciality areas within rural sociology and links rural sociology itself to other disciplines (Lobao 2004).

The sociology of agriculture remains vibrant. Buttel (2003) notes the contemporary period has ushered in a number of topics that should engage rural sociologists. These include: global long-distance commodity production/consumption chains; global neo-liberalism of agriculture, where public interests and those of small farmers are becoming subordinate to corporate interests; industrialization of the livestock industry; and use of biotechnologies. Conversely, Buttel (2003) argues for the need to scrutinize countervailing forces, such as protest and consumer movements, that might mediate these trends and create a more socially-just agricultural system. To this list of topics, one might add the study of local food systems and civic agriculture (Lyson 2003); the relentless suburbanization of farming areas; and consumption issues of all types, from food to rural landscapes. Finally, researchers can be expected to increasingly address nutrition, obesity, and food choice issues, topics that link rural sociology to the biological sciences.

In the post-2000 period, a new wave of policy-relevant research has emerged, a trend that can be expected to continue (Swanson 2001). The trend is reflected in the policy-related volume produced by two past RSS presidents, David Brown and Louis Swanson (2003), in recent RSS efforts to produce policy-briefs for government and nongovernmental officials, and in RSS membership in COSSA (Consortium of Social Science Association) which brings social science research to bear on federal policy. Rural development policy, farm policy, rural poverty, and welfare reform, are topics often addressed.

Finally, it is worth noting three areas where research gaps remain to be filled. First, in the face of widespread changes in the food and agricultural system, environment, and rural regions, rural sociologists need to take greater stock of theory. These changes are interrelated and require more holistic theoretical approaches that go beyond and link respective branches of research. They entail questions such as: how does the development of capitalism proceed—and what will be the role of rural places in this development? How are inequalities related to poverty, food and nutrition, environmental conditions, and other life-chances reproduced? Theoretical development of rural sociology is needed to answer these questions and to create a more coherent field. Second, related in part to limited theorizing about the role of rural areas in national development,

rural sociologists have not devoted much attention to the meaning and significance of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. These elections challenged rural sociologists' views that urban-rural social beliefs and political gaps were closing. Is there a new spatial logic to politics, where rural areas increasingly reflect the sentiments of two sets of residents: non-farm, long-time rural residents historically neglected by government; and anti-government, socially conservative newcomer urban populations? Third, as Tickamyer (1996) noted some time ago, gaps in the quality and quantity of available data need to be addressed. Methodologies and measures to collect data tailored to rural populations should be given attention.

One question sometimes asked is: can rural sociology remain relevant in the face of the declining rural population? First, given the uneven nature of capitalism, there will always be places that remain marginalized, left behind historically or in the course of different rounds of development. Second, rural environments persist due to their social construction, and are constantly reproduced. 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 based on their preconceived views about these places. People construct "rural environments" in urban settings, such as seen in community gardens and in regulations protecting urban wildlife. Finally, 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.

I have noted the continuing importance of rural sociology as a field and that there will always be a "rurality" to study in the future. However, in the future, the institutional support system is likely to look different from today. Since the 1980s, agricultural colleges have undergone dramatic changes in regard to federal and state support. This has led to slow or no growth in faculty from most disciplines in these colleges. At the same time, there appears to be rising interest in topics addressed by the field such as food, farming, rural inequality, and environment, among sociologists located in liberal arts settings. Further, since public concerns about food,

farming, and environment continue to increase, rural sociologists presence in nongovernmental and governmental institutions can be expected to grow. Thus, likely there will be continuity in the research undertaken by rural sociologists but some change in the institutional settings where this work is conducted.

Issues addressed by rural sociologists pertaining to farming, food, environmental conditions, and rural poverty, are among the most important public concerns today. Moreover, these issues offer distinct empirical and theoretical challenges for sociology as a discipline. In the past, rural sociology's broad scope and historical institutional location too often left rural sociologists looking inward and separated from the parent discipline. The institutional changes noted above coupled with the centrality of issues addressed by rural sociologists, may produce a back-to-the future, where rural sociology once again becomes more closely linked and engaged with the parent discipline.

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