

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RURAL SOCIOLOGY AND ITS PROSPECTS¹

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ABSTRACT Rural sociology developed largely in the land grant-USDA complex. The current status of rural sociology is briefly examined. The new agenda of rural sociologists probably will include such areas as sociology of agriculture, sociology of natural resources, and the sociology of development and economic change. The environment in which sociology will work on its new agenda, the land grant-USDA complex, is in disarray. The causes of the disarray are various academic chauvinisms. Chauvinism of philosophic orientation, disciplines, administrative structures, and academic excellence create the need for a new covenant for academe to serve society. Modest suggestions for rural sociology include providing a useful balance among problem-solving, subject matter analysis and disciplinary analysis as well as a balance between the emerging agenda and work in the traditional areas of emphasis. Also needed is a clear focus on problems and issues defined by the various elements of the political system for rural sociology to serve society.

Introduction

This paper presents some observations of rural sociology and its contributions to society. With the presentation I test the hypothesis that the observations are interesting and useful to sociologists.

I start with my perspectives; present a brief history of rural sociology; comment on the current status of rural sociology; outline my views of the new agenda of rural sociology; examine the disarray of the land grant university-USDA complex; and make some modest suggestions for the profession. You will decide if the hypothesis is rejected.

Perspective

It seems useful to outline my perspective as I observe rural sociology. I am not in the bowl where the fish labeled "rural sociologists" swim. I stand outside the bowl

¹I have benefited from comments of Walter Armbruster, Don Dillman, Peter Korsching, and Ted Napier on earlier drafts of this paper. None, however, should be assigned any responsibility for its contents.

and look at the fish, but I observe from a certain perspective.

I am an agricultural economist; however, my background has some association with rural sociologists. I minored in sociology at the M.S. level, and while on the faculty at Texas A&M University, I served in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. I also was employed briefly as an Experiment Station administrator at Texas A&M where I counseled with rural sociologists on research project development.

In the last 25 years with Farm Foundation, I have worked with regional committees of rural sociology in both research and Extension. From 1978 to 1984 I served on the Joint Council for Food and Agriculture Science, and this has given me the opportunity to participate in planning and coordination efforts of the various disciplines and functions of agricultural science and education.

Lastly, I have been a member of the Rural Sociological Society for a number of years and thus a reader (at least scanner) of its publications and a participant in the Society's 1983 and 1984 annual meetings.

I cite the above information, not to convince you of my expertise in observing rural sociology, but to help you better understand my inability to comprehend the total reality of rural sociology.

Brief history of rural sociology

I turn now to a brief statement of my understanding of the history of rural sociology. Obviously it will be incomplete. My understanding draws on oral history as well as a few published sources.

Rural sociology has developed largely in the land grant-USDA complex. Both Flinn (1982) and Collard (1984) make the point, not uniformly accepted, that this environment, plus the split between rural sociologists and the American Sociological Society, reinforced the growing identification of rural sociologists as applied rather than theoretical sociologists. It also led to the institutional isolation of rural sociologists from the rest of the sociological discipline. In addition, it placed rural sociology in a framework that, according to Pinkett (1984), enabled southern congressmen in the 1940s to greatly impact funding for rural sociological research when they were unhappy with the results of "reconnaissance cultural surveys."

As Flinn (1982) points out, from the outset the problems that rural sociologists studied were substantially defined from outside the discipline. The Country Life Commission outlined the tasks for early rural sociology investigation. The role played by the churches was important in defining problems for early rural sociology. Funding by the USDA had significant influence on problem identification.

All of these forces led rural sociology to a rural, not agricultural, fundamentalism. Newby (1982) holds that this

perspective has dogged the history of rural sociology: "There has been a general reluctance to recognize that the term 'rural' is an empirical category rather than a theoretical one--that it is merely a 'geographical expression.' Instead, persistent attempts have been made to turn 'rural' into a theoretical category, something which actually explains human behavior" (p. 129). At the 1984 Rural Sociological Society meeting, a number of speakers were concerned with the issue of whether a "rural society" existed and, if it did, was the difference sufficient to justify rural sociology. Others did not seem to think the issue was important.

Both Flinn (1982) and Newby (1982) identified a "post-Hightower" era of rural sociology. With the publication of *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times* (Hightower, 1973), more attention was given to "people oriented" analysis that put rural sociology in a higher profile in the land grant-USDA complex.

Current status of rural sociology

The current scene in rural sociology is given an interesting and, perhaps, useful perspective by two recent articles. In one, Gardner and Nuckton (1984) describe sociology papers as follows: "As a rule, the papers have not identified a researchable problem, used theory to deduce a testable hypothesis, nor adequately performed empirical tests" (p. 101). They go on to say: "If economics is immature--then, in our opinion, sociology is still in its infancy as a science. It is at the stage of haggling about paradigms, not yet having settled on one, and thus not ready to do normal science" (p. 103). They conclude that economists "have chosen to be more precise in a limited sphere of life, while sociologists have elected to remain inexact but broad" (p. 107).

In the other article, Newby (1982) holds that the differences between agricultural economics and rural sociology are not entirely illusory and do not arise from a mere failure of communication: "They are engendered by quite different conceptions of the purpose of their respective intellectual activity; by different, and often opposed, theories of human behavior and by different, though frequently complementary, styles of research" (p. 125). He goes on to say: "Whenever rural sociologists engage with policy matters they are more likely to recommend wholesale structural change beyond the reach of politics rather than piecemeal social engineering. Equally likely, however, they do not engage at all, preferring the purest pursuit of sociological truth rather than be tainted by compromise with the real world. Neither response is viewed by agricultural economists as being particularly helpful" (p. 126). Newby suggests that sociologists have the stereotype of economists as "narrow-minded technocrats supportive of the status quo and unable to question existing economic institutions" (p. 127). He suggests that the stereotype by the economist of sociologists is "that sociology is no more than a thin

veneer on radical politics which has little to offer the scientific objectivity of economic analysis" (p. 127).

Newby (1982) holds that American rural sociology currently emphasizes a set of issues different from those of previous decades: "Formerly, American rural sociology was concerned primarily with studies of agricultural technology, the quality of life and social indicators, community development, demography, and the educational and occupational achievement processes among rural youth" (p. 135). He suggests that the thrusts are changing to an analysis of the structure of agriculture, agricultural policy, agricultural labor, regional inequality, and agricultural ecology. He holds that American rural sociologists have a concern to develop a political economy of agricultural production in order to understand a number of temporary social changes in rural society. He states: "'Political economy' in this context, is often used as a euphemism for Marxist theory by sociologists. In many respects this annexation of the term is unfortunate, not to say confusing, since it preempts the possibility of the constructive theoretical debate between Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to the political economy of modern agriculture....Nevertheless as agricultural economics has--from a sociological perspective--disappeared further down the econometric road, so it has left a space into which rural sociology is increasingly moving. How far this will produce constructive dialogue or reinforce the dismissive stereotypes referred to earlier in this review remains to be seen" (p. 135).

In my judgment, these positions and issues existing between agricultural economists and rural sociologists are also characteristic of the relationship of rural sociology to agriculture science in general.

Mention of the use of the Marxian paradigm raises sensitivities. Let me hasten to state that few rural sociologists use the Marxian paradigm and most do not wish to be labeled as "Marxists." While few papers at American Agricultural Economics Association meetings will use the Marxian paradigm, a number at the Rural Sociology Society meetings will. It may be that sociologists are more tolerant than agricultural economists of different perspectives.

New agenda of rural sociology

Evidence from the 1983 and 1984 Rural Sociology Society meetings, statements by Flinn and Newby, as well as the issues for the 1980s discussed in the book edited by Dillman and Hobbs (1982), indicate that the new agenda of rural sociology probably will include such areas as the sociology of agriculture, sociology of natural resources, and the sociology of development and economic change. Continued exploration of these areas will tend to break down any perceived "rural" overemphasis and can accomplish objectives of theoretical innovation and practical relevance.

I personally applaud such an agenda. Rural sociology can serve society well with this program. However, it will

do so within the context of the land grant-USDA complex. I now turn to some difficulties the complex is facing.

Land grant university-USDA complex in disarray

In a paper developed from a university-wide lecture at Mississippi State University, Johnson (1984) suggests that the ability of the USDA and land grant system to serve agriculture has been reduced. The sources of support for the land grant university-USDA complex, as well as the complex itself, are split into factions. Johnson discusses the causes of these splits as academic chauvinisms, using the dictionary definition of chauvinism as "undue, especially insidious attachments or partiality for a group or place to which one belongs or has belonged" (p. 5). He discusses chauvinisms of:

- (1) philosophic orientations
- (2) disciplines
- (3) land grant agricultural colleges with heavy stress on production
- (4) non-land grant universities
- (5) narrowly defined concepts of academic excellence
- (6) anti- and pro-administrative positions

In the area of philosophic chauvinisms, Johnson (1984) is concerned with undue attachment to philosophic positions of logical positivism, normativism, and pragmatism. He holds that the chauvinism of logical positivism elevates the pursuit of positive knowledge as a dominant end and denigrates the pursuit of knowledge about values critical to problem definition and solution as either unscientific or unobjective. The reciprocal, normative chauvinism treats knowledge about values and prescription as superior and more important than positive knowledge. He says "both positivistic and normativistic chauvinisms are forms of anti-intellectualism which can open the door to mysticism and flights from knowledge" (p. 5). He also points out that pragmatic chauvinism downplays the work of scientists in attempting to increase the stock of positive knowledge and independent efforts of humanists and students of the arts to accumulate independent knowledge about values. Overattachment to any of these philosophic orientations can prevent agricultural science and education from serving society well.

Every participant in the agricultural science and education system understands disciplinary chauvinism--this undue attachment to one's discipline, be it physical or biological science, social science, or the arts and humanities--which leads to unserviceable problem definition, methods of analysis, and improper allocation of resources to deal with the problems of society. The enemy becomes the other disciplines rather than ignorance.

Colleges of agriculture with heavy emphasis on production often suffer from a practical agrarian chauvinism. Colleges of agriculture and the USDA often have

a bias toward problem-solving and subject matter work and against disciplinary work. There is a real complementarity between problem-solving, subject matter and disciplinary efforts. It is well accepted that major advances in disciplines result from the confrontation of disciplinary thought with problems they cannot handle.

Undue emphasis on academic excellence tends to go hand in hand with disciplinary chauvinism, with subsequent denigration of problem-solving and subject-matter activities. Thus, Extension workers and teachers as well as researchers, who are very productive from society's point of view in doing problem-solving or subject-matter work, are not rewarded by institutions which have a narrowly defined concept of academic excellence. Both non-land grant universities and parts of the land grant university other than colleges of agriculture or engineering often exhibit this kind of chauvinism. However, workers in agriculture need help from these groups, especially for their disciplinary contributions.

The last category of chauvinism discussed by Johnson (1984) is that of anti- and pro-administrative chauvinism. University workers with anti-administrative chauvinism fail to understand and resent the greater amount of administration required for problem-solving and subject-matter work. Again, the administration rather than ignorance is often viewed as the enemy. Pro-administrative chauvinism sometimes relates to disciplinary chauvinism and opposes any change in administrative arrangement that allows or facilitates problem-solving research through institutes or new departments. Horror stories from some colleges of agriculture resulting from attempts to bring together animal science out of a series of species production departments illustrate these problems.

One of the major consequences of the various chauvinisms in academia is that they get transferred to supporters and thus funding of work in agriculture. Workers with strong chauvinisms attract followings from congressmen, state legislators, and interest groups. The thing to which the undue attachment exists becomes the end of activity rather than a means to deal with problems or advancement in knowledge. As Johnson (1982) suggests, there is a need for a new covenant, for without this covenant the public probably will not, in the long run, provide the support and legitimacy necessary for academia or science and education. If this were to happen, there would be no need to be concerned about rural sociology, colleges of agriculture, universities, or the USDA.

Some modest suggestions for rural sociology

Given my understandings as revealed above, what do I have to say to rural sociologists?

In my view, rural sociology is and should be useful to society. This means that there should be a balance between problem-solving, subject-matter, and disciplinary work. I view rural sociology as I do agricultural economics, in that

I see more emphasis on problem-solving and subject-matter work than I do on disciplinary work. But, more important than the relative weights of these kinds of activity is the maintenance of a useful balance. It seems to me that as a collection of individual workers, rural sociology has a reasonably good balance.

I think rural sociologists' agendas for the sociology of agriculture, the sociology of natural resources and the sociology of development and economic change are useful. My criteria for useful is that increasing knowledge and understanding in these areas will aid society in dealing with many important problems.

Of course, work needs to continue in understanding the rural community, the family, and other of the more traditional emphases of rural sociology. Again, balance is desirable and needed. The reductions of the chauvinisms described by Johnson (1982) and the development of a covenant for rural sociologists to serve society (including agriculture, rural people, and the nation as a whole) is needed. It seems to me this covenant cannot be obtained by undue adherence to radical activism, any of the positions described under the philosophic chauvinisms, or a solely disciplinary orientation.

Lack of a single unifying paradigm makes the practicing of rural sociology research and education difficult. I would not seek too hard to develop the overarching paradigm. Part of the charm and usefulness of rural sociologists is that they bring diverse theories to problems. My suggestion is that in problem-solving research one needs to focus on the problem and bring the various theories to bear. A clear focus on the problem will lead to work that overcomes many of the criticisms made by Gardner and Nuckton (1984).

If rural sociologists are to be useful in helping society make better policy decisions, the focus needs to be on issues defined as important by the political system. This does not mean the political system always defines issues correctly. By definition, sociology includes a critical examination of the structure of social organizations. Thus it can point out when the political system has not defined issues correctly. But unless the political system finds the issues usefully defined, and understands the results of the analysis and its policy implications, little is contributed.

Concluding comments

I presented some remarks on the role of rural sociologists in public policy formulation when I accepted the Distinguished Service to Rural Life Award (Hildreth, 1983). On rereading those remarks and thinking about them, I still subscribe to the views they contained. While I do not repeat those remarks, I do remind you of these three sentences. "It is my view that the application of rural sociological knowledge can yield a richer and more useful policy. Rural sociology has a comparative advantage over economics in developing nonmonetary normative and positive

information. Compared with most humanists, rural sociologists have more experience with respect to rural and farm environments, farm production problems and processes, agriculture business, and agriculture science" (p. 343).

I do hope these observations are of some interest and use. They are intended to be helpful. Following Bealer's (1983) presidential address to the Rural Sociological Society, I hope these remarks might aid rural sociologists who, without self-deception, will ask what it is that they are trying to do and why they are doing it this way. Society needs the analysis and perspective of rural sociology, and rural sociology needs the interest and support of society.

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