

Conceptualizing "Rural" for Research in Education: A Sociological Perspective¹

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The lack of consensus on the denotation of "rural" in educational and social work research makes generalizability of findings problematic. This paper reviews definitional problems related to occupational, sociocultural, ecological and multi-dimensional conceptions of rurality. Multi-dimensional typologies developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Services and the Maine State Planning Office are described and recommended.

From a sociological perspective, an overview of recently published research on education in rural areas suggests the need for more precise conceptualization of what is meant by "rural." The articles published in the inaugural issue of *Research in Rural Education* reflect several different uses of the concept. Mathews and Winkle [19] and Holder [13] use the term in an undefined general sense. Drummond [9], Chu and Culbertson [5], Rider [24], and Sawyer and Sawyer [25] report research from settings that are, apparently, deemed obviously rural. Pladson and Lemon [23] employed a rural typology based on the dual factors of school enrollment and distance from an urban center. Dermott, Roberts and McIntire [7] made no reference to the concept but reported a study set in a Maine community that metropolitans might label rural.

Mathews [18], discussing rural education in the current edition of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* reported the absence of a satisfactory working definition of the term. A recent review of social work practice literature suggested a similar lack of clarity among social workers [27; 28].

The lack of a common definition within social work and within education is unfortunate on several accounts. It is a key technical impediment to the creation of an adequate federal data base [22]. It impedes the development of the consciousness essential to the emergence of a political constituency advocating the interests of rural people [18]. Above all, the description of rural eccentricities which constitutes much of the literature fails to provide the conceptual foundation required for theory and practice. As Carl Taylor [15], a leading rural sociologist of the 1940s, suggested:

Conceptualization is essential to classification of knowledge...the first step in scientific analysis. A concept...prescribes that this datum is included within and that datum is excluded from a class or type of phenomena...(Once) a phenomenon is assigned its place in a type or class, all that is known about other phenomena included in that class can be used to help understand it (p. V).

This paper describes several ways "rural" has been conceptualized by sociologists [27]. It is hoped that this discussion will enhance educators' understanding of rural settings and will increase the generalizability of future

research on education in rural areas.

First, a caveat is in order. Rural America is many realities. Rural New England differs geographically, climatically, and culturally from the rural areas of the Midwest, the High Plains, the Piedmont, the Deep South, and Pacific Northwest to say nothing of rural Puerto Rico, Hawaii or Alaska. Within these regions exists a marvelous diversity of cultural heritage, values, aspirations, and socio-political forms—all of which have implications for education as well as for social services in general. To overlook that diversity is to risk the fallacy of local generalizing [6] in which we assume that all rural is like our rural. Although this paper focuses primarily upon rural/nonrural distinctions, it is equally important to explore systematically the differences among the many realities that are rural in the United States.

Distinguishing "Rural" and "Urban"

There are rural sociologists who question the sociological significance of the concepts rural and urban for modern society and who urge moving beyond rural/urban comparisons to focus on the problems and needs of rural people rather than worrying very much about who is or is not rural. They make an important point.

Nonetheless, the creation of a viable set of definitions has both practical and theoretical utility. In practical terms, rural/urban eligibility differentials are a fact of life for many federal and state programs. The definitions selected may affect the distribution of governmental monies for programs which will or will not be able to serve real people in specific communities of residence.

Conceptual clarity is essential to building theory on which to base practice. If "rural" is to become a useful analytical tool and guide for educators and social workers, it is necessary to operationalize the concept, to separate out its component parts and to specify those attributes which distinguish rural from urban/metropolitan/nonrural. (If these tasks cannot be achieved, or if, having accomplished them, not much of significance results, one would be justified in discarding the concept

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in the quest for universally excellent education or social services) [2].

In the United States "rurality" traditionally has referred to areas of low population density, small absolute size, and relative isolation—areas in which agricultural production provided the major economic base. The rural way of life was believed to be reasonably homogeneous and distinguishable from that of other social sectors, most notably the "city" [2]. In 1938 sociologist Louis Wirth published his seminal article, "Urbanism as a Way of Life" [30], which triggered a flurry of attempts by rural sociologists to discern patterns of social action and organization typical to urban and rural settings. Their work resulted in a remarkable lack of consensus.

In 1960 Dewey [8] surveyed the rural/urban distinctions proposed by eighteen authors and identified 40 items on which rural and urban areas were presumed to differ. Urban areas, he reported, were believed more likely than rural ones to be characterized by heterogeneity, impersonal relations, division of labor, mobility, segmented roles, class differences, predatory relations, concern for punctuality, new family roles, and changing employment patterns including increased employment of females. Urban milieux were also believed to be more secular, non-agricultural, cosmopolitan, complex, tolerant, superficial, sophisticated, commercialized, liberal, automated, transient, objective, and practical. In addition, according to the eighteen sociologists surveyed, such areas were characterized by multiple dwelling units, tenancy, utilitarianism, formal controls, interdependency, subjective outlook, social participation, individualism, and intense use of occupational space.

There was little agreement among the sociologists. Only heterogeneity was listed by a majority as an urban trait. Sixteen of the 40 items were mentioned only once, nine only twice, and 10 by only three writers. The only thing that seemed to be agreed upon was that "in some vague ways" rural and urban seemed to be "related to city and country, to community variations in size and density of population" [8, p. 60]. In retrospect, it seems possible that these definitional disagreements may have been related to the differing ideological bents of the "value-free" sociologists as they hastened to laud or condemn the process of urbanization which was underway throughout the nation.

Among the sociologists of the period there was extended debate over whether rural-urban distinctions should be considered dichotomous or continuous. Eventually, simple dichotomy was rejected for two reasons. First, instead of being either purely rural or purely urban, actual communities seemed urban or rural mainly in comparison with others. Portland, Maine, for example, with a 1980 population of about 75,000 seems very urban to students from other areas of Maine but decidedly less so to those from Boston or New York City. Second, it was not possible to achieve a sociological consensus on any single characteristic or set of attributes which clearly distinguished each of the two areas from the other [4].

The rural-urban continuum has been seen as real but

of relatively little importance [8]. Another sociologist reported many continua forming a process which affected groups and individuals at particular places in the social structure rather than characterizing entire communities. Instead of a rural-urban continuum, he imagined "a whole series of meshes of different textures superimposed (on) each other" which together created a much more complex pattern [21, p. 327]. Consequently, he concluded, an "attempt to tie particular patterns of social relationships to specific geographical milieux is a singularly fruitless exercise" [p. 322].

In an attempt to escape the conceptual quicksand of idiosyncratic description several authors have explored occupational, ecological, and sociocultural approaches to rurality [2, 29]. Each of these categories will be reviewed in turn before this paper concludes with a look at two more promising multi-dimensional definitions.

Occupational Rurality

The man (or woman) on the street tends to equate rural with farm. And one of the earliest rural academicians, Charles Josiah Galpin, used the term rural to refer exclusively to isolated, individual farms. Galpin [11], writing in 1918, saw any clustering of people "whether in the grade of hamlet, village or city" as urban [p. 30]. Forty years later rural sociologist Alvin Bertrand [4], while recognizing the existence of nonfarm rural residents, continued to use rural interchangeably with rural-farm or farmer. And only ten years ago in a doctoral dissertation in sociology respondents were categorized rural if they currently lived on a farm, had been raised on a farm, had parents who were farmers, currently worked in an occupation related to farming, or were married to any of these [20].

It is clear, however, that many non-farmers are nevertheless rural. Rural occupations include employment in mining, forestry, fishing, rural manufacturing, and corporate farming as well as work on the more traditional family farm. While it might be possible to distill somehow an elusive *l'essence rural* from occupational commonalities, such an attempt seems unlikely to bear much fruit. The roles performed within these "rural" occupations vary enormously. Consider migrant worker versus foreman versus land owner, or herring fisherman versus sardine packer, or skidder operator versus paper machine tender versus forest manager—all of which might be termed rural occupations. And there are, after all, teachers and social workers and many other professionals who live and work in rural areas, too. Occupation would seem to provide little or no satisfactory basis for defining rural.

Socio-Cultural Rurality

Some students of rural issues have attempted to single out social and cultural phenomena which might distinguish rural and urban. From the long list of cultural items proposed by Wirth [30], perhaps five— anonymity, division of labor, heterogeneity, impersonal formal rela-

tionships, and status independent of personal acquaintance—might plausibly be maximized in urban areas and minimized in rural ones [8]. Looking through the other end of the telescope, one might expect rural areas to be characterized by visibility, non-specialized labor, homogeneity, informal networks, and status based upon personal acquaintance.

Such qualities do exist and must be taken into account by the teacher or social worker practicing in rural areas. In a small community the professional who neglects informal networks, is unaware of the community "grapevine," who forgets that persons may be esteemed by others as much for who they are as for what they know, who violates local cultural traditions or taboos, who shrugs off her visibility both inside and outside the classroom or social agency, or who hankers after specialization and rejects being a Jill-of-many-skills, does so at considerable risk. However, these "rural" conditions also exist, if in somewhat lesser degree, in "urban" settings.

Some writers advocate a socio-cultural approach which neatly sidesteps the problem of definition by simply asking respondents to identify themselves as rural or urban [1, 17, 20]. Such a procedure may be acceptable for research which contrasts specific individuals and does not attempt to generalize based on locality of residence. Among students from Maine, however, there is little consensus about whether their home towns—even those with fewer than 5,000 residents—are rural or urban. This seems consistent, also, with a finding vis a vis "urban villagers" that "Some people are in the city but not of it, whereas others are of the city but not in it" [21, p. 327]. Or it may simply reflect differing degrees of discomfort with the too often negative affect given to rural by an economically and politically dominant urban society.

Socio-cultural definitions of rural have been sharply criticized. It has been argued that there is

...no such thing as urban culture or rural culture but only various cultural contents somewhere on the rural-urban continuum. The movement of zoot suits, jazz, and antibiotics from city to country is no more a spread of urbanism than is the transfer or diffusion of blue jeans, square dancing, and tomatoes to the cities a movement of ruralism to urban centers. There can be, and most assuredly are, small rural communities which are secular, civilized, dynamic, and highly literate as well as large sacred, essentially primitive, illiterate, and relatively static urban communities [8, p. 65].

Socio-cultural phenomena, like occupation, seem an inadequate basis for a satisfactory rural-urban definition.

Ecological Rurality

Ecology, as used in drawing rural-urban distinctions, refers to the distribution of people in space with particular attention to population size and density and to their relative degree of isolation. Frequently, state and federal agencies employ definitions of rural based on the single factor of population size. In a recent report the Maine State Planning Office [16] listed official federal definitions in which any place with fewer than 1,500; 2,500; 4,000; 5,000; 20,000; and 50,000 inhabitants was deemed

rural.

Rural-urban continua based solely on population are also commonplace. One recent attempt ranged from "absolute rural" (isolated farm residence) to "absolute urban" (metropolis of 1,000,000+) with intermediate categories including rural neighborhoods; villages under 2,500; small towns 2,500-9,999; small cities 10,000-49,999; cities 50,000-499,999; suburbs; and large cities 500,000-999,999 [10, p. 6]. Such single factor continua are open to criticism. One might ask, for example, on what basis suburbs should be included. Clearly factors other than simple population size are involved.

Most attempts to define rural in terms of population are based on data collected since 1790 by the United States Bureau of the Census. For the most part the Census defines urban places and calls what is left over "rural." Census definitions themselves have varied considerably. Rural was introduced as a concept for the first time in 1874 when it was defined as the population of a county exclusive of any cities or towns having 8,000 or more inhabitants. In 1880 the urban threshold was reduced to 4,000 and in 1890 to 1,000. In 1900 it was raised to 2,500, the definition which has persisted, generally speaking, until today [26].

Beginning in 1920 the rural population was subdivided into rural-farm and rural-nonfarm based on farm size and value of farm products sold. In 1950 the designation of the "urban fringe"—the continuously built up areas surrounding cities of 50,000 or more people—was changed from rural to urban. As a result, rural, defined somewhat more homogeneously, consists of what remains after incorporated and unincorporated places with 2,500 or more inhabitants and urban fringe areas have been subtracted from the population [26].

The United States also has been divided into some 266 Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) and a nonmetropolitan remainder consisting of areas outside metropolitan areas of 50,000 or more and outside their adjacent urban fringes. Politics as well as "rationality" may enter into the designation of an SMSA. For example, Bangor, Maine, with a 1980 population of 31,645, along with several nearby small towns became metropolitan literally overnight in 1981 as a result of political maneuvering in which the area was redefined. As a consequence, the several newly urbanized towns became eligible for funding from certain federal grant programs and ineligible for assistance from others.

There are several difficulties associated with Census definitions of rural and nonmetropolitan. There is, first of all, the temptation to use the terms interchangeably even though many rural residents would consider at least the larger nonmetro areas as "big city" [14]. There is also the enormous variation between even those small communities which a clear consensus would label rural. Maine fishing villages differ significantly from Appalachian coal towns, Iowa farm communities, Colorado ski resorts, Florida retirement centers, Mississippi Delta counties, Alaska native villages, and so on—yet all of these fit a numerical definition of rural [18]. Finally, some 55 percent of the rural population lives in metropolitan coun-

ties or in counties immediately adjacent to metropolitan counties [14]. The small bedroom community with its nearby urban center may not be rural; a substantially larger town beyond a metropolitan orbit might be [18]. Certainly, life experiences such as access to specialized education or social services may vary considerably from one numerically rural town to another.

Pladson and Lemon [23], in their study of elementary school principals in rural North Dakota, attempted to avoid the population trap by using a two-factor model of ruralness based on geographical isolation in addition to population. Population density was measured by whether a community had fewer than 100, 101-300, or 301-600 K through 12 students in its school district. Schools were ranked also by distance from an urban center—10 to 25 miles, 25 to 40 miles, and more than 40 miles. The eight North Dakota urban centers they listed ranged in population from 7,078 to 59,000. Because the authors did not define urban center (even though the concept is central to their rural typology), it is difficult to generalize their findings to school districts in other states.

Multi-Dimensional Rurality

In an attempt to appraise differences in population characteristics among American communities more accurately, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed a ten category classification into which every county in the United States has been placed [12]. All U.S. counties or county equivalents were first designated metropolitan or nonmetropolitan. Then metro counties were grouped as greater metropolitan, medium metropolitan, or small metropolitan according to the population size of the SMSA of which they are a part. Greater metro counties were further subdivided into core and fringe categories depending on whether or not they contained the primary central city of the greater metro area.

Counties lacking an SMSA were designated nonmetro and divided according to aggregate urban population (the sum of their population residing in centers of 2,500 or more) and geographical proximity to metro areas (geographical contiguity to a metro county plus "at least one percent of the labor force commuting to the metro

Table 1
U.S. Metropolitan/Nonmetropolitan County Typology^a

County Type	SMSA Population	Aggregate Urban Population	Contiguous to SMSA County?	Total such Counties	Examples ^c
METROPOLITAN					
Greater Metropolitan Core	1,000,000 +	—	—	48	5 New York City Counties Cook County, IL
Greater Metropolitan Fringe	1,000,000 +	—	Yes	127	Montgomery Co., MD Fairfax Co., VA
Medium Metropolitan	250,000 to 999,999	—	—	258	Phoenix, Oklahoma City Salt Lake City
Small Metropolitan	Less than 250,000	—	—	179	Portland, ME Eugene, OR
NONMETROPOLITAN					
Urbanized Neighboring ^b	—	20,000 +	Yes	191	Kennebec Co., ME Licking Co., OH
Urbanized Isolated ^b	—	20,000 +	No	137	Aroostook Co., ME Marion Co., OH
Less Urbanized Neighboring	—	2,500 to 19,999	Yes	564	Franklin Co., ME Clinton Co., OH
Less Urbanized Isolated	—	2,500 to 19,999	No	721	Hancock Co., ME Coshocton Co., OH
Totally Rural Neighboring	—	Less than 2,500	Yes	246	Lincoln Co., ME Morgan Co., OH
Totally Rural Isolated	—	Less than 2,500	No	626	Adams Co., OH Forest Co., PA

^aSource: Hines, Brown and Zimmer, p. 4.

^bThe USDA terminology is "adjacent" for neighboring and "not adjacent" for isolated.

^cCategorization of all U.S. counties is available from United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Washington, D.C. 20250.

central county for work") [p. 3]. This resulted in six nonmetro categories: urbanized adjacent, urbanized not adjacent, less urbanized adjacent, less urbanized not adjacent, totally rural adjacent, and totally rural not adjacent [See Table 1].

The Maine State Planning Office [16] has taken this process a step further in developing a ten category urban-rural typology with which to classify every Maine town. State planners were concerned that certain Maine communities seemed rural in some regards but urban in others, that different communities seemed rural in different ways, and that different policies might be required to address the varying aspects of rural community life in Maine.

The planners first conceptualized ideal type urban, suburban and rural communities. Then twelve indicators related to community type and three more believed important to policy-making were selected among those for which data were readily available. The twelve included number of year-round residents; percent of housing located in dense, compact settlements; percent of housing located in multi-unit structures; persons per household; percent of resident workers employed in farming or fishing; monthly fluctuations in employment in the community; degree to which jobs were concentrated in a few industries; number of jobs per resident worker; workers per person; number of establishments offering goods and services; and diversity of trade and services available. The three policy-relevant indicators chosen were ratio of peak seasonal population to year-round residents; percent of year-round residents living in group quarters; and percent of housing built prior to 1940.

A study of Maine communities taking into account all fifteen indicators resulted in a ten category urban-rural typology. Three types of *urban communities*—trade and employment centers, small economically diversified cities and small economically specialized cities—were identified. Five types of *rural suburbs*—typical suburb, new suburb, suburban fringe, and dependent suburb—were distinguished. Two types of *primary industry town*—primary industry trade centers and small primary industry towns—were named.

Interestingly, only primary industry towns, which constitute but ten percent of all Maine communities, reflect the traditional rural notion of primary dependence upon the land. And in those *most rural* communities only one-twelfth to one-fifth of employed residents work in farming or fishing. This Maine typology differs markedly from Census Bureau definitions of rural. According to the Census only ten percent of Maine's communities are urban. According to the Maine State Planning Office only ten percent of Maine's communities are purely rural.

Looking back at the varied attempts to distinguish rural from urban, it is clear that multi-dimensional typologies such as those of the USDA and the Maine State Planning Office offer the greatest potential utility to educators and social workers who want to provide or evaluate services in rural areas. Professionals working in states in which community typologies tailored to specific local conditions have been developed may wish to base their re-

search on those classifications. Their findings should then have statewide significance. If however, more broadly generalizable results are desired—and such should be objective whenever possible—then the nationally useable typology developed by the USDA may be more appropriate.

The USDA approach, by defining types of rural areas with precision and generalizability, should yield research findings which are more likely to be useful to practitioners throughout the nation. Use of such a typology should enable consumers of research to decide more readily the potential applicability of reported research to *their* rural reality.

In concluding, it might be useful to suggest a number of ways the USDA typology might have contributed to the research projects reported in the inaugural issue of *Research in Rural Education*. The approach seems least applicable to Rider [24] and Chu and Culbertson [5] who report from Alaskan village settings which are characterized by a degree of remoteness that seems qualitatively different from that of rural areas in the rest of the United States. Even in Alaska, however, village areas range from totally rural not adjacent to less urbanized not adjacent. And some villages are likely within the orbit of Anchorage or Fairbanks.

The typology has greater utility for the remaining articles. Drummond [9] studied group interaction styles preferred by pre-adolescents in rural, suburban, urban and inner city schools. Under the USDA typology Cincinnati and Columbus would be classified major metropolitan cores; Merrimack, N.H., small metropolitan; Veazie, Maine, urbanized not adjacent; and Skowhegan, Maine less urbanized not adjacent.

Sawyer and Sawyer [25] studied rural kindergarten pupils in "public and private elementary schools in a small village upstate New York school district" [p. 8]. Had they applied the USDA classification, it would be easier and safer to generalize their findings to other areas.

Mathews and Winkle [19] are interested in computer equity for young women in rural schools but don't define rural. The USDA typology could be useful in a follow up study investigating, for example, whether women in nonmetro counties adjacent to metro counties differ in computer literacy when compared with those in nonadjacent nonmetro counties. If differences are found, it might be possible to target use of resources in response.

Holder [13, p. 22] cites a research summary [3] which concludes:

Rural communities are particularly resistant to change when *external input* is the motivational force; therefore, *local decisions* about how a program will be developed and implemented are of vital importance. Any design for change will have to come from within the community and acknowledge its unique capabilities and characteristics.

Use of the USDA typology might suggest asking if this is true in *all* communities, in *all rural* communities, or only in *certain types of rural* communities. Holder also reports that in some rural education systems the school board is not only the policy-maker but "is in reality the enforcer of established policies" [p. 23]. Use of the USDA

typology might help establish in what types of communities this is so.

Although Dermott, Roberts, and McIntire [7] do not use the term rural in their discussion of decoding skills and field dependence/independence, identification of their Bangor, Maine setting as urbanized not adjacent might increase the generalizability of their results.

Finally, categorization of the Pladson and Lemon [23] urban centers in USDA county terms identifies one small metropolitan county, three urbanized not adjacent counties and four less urbanized not adjacent counties. More detailed analysis of their data using this more specific typology of urban centers might yield increased understanding of rural school principals and their districts.

The major benefit of the USDA typology is that, having defined rural and urban with greater precision, it becomes possible to test with increased sophistication the extent to which rural-urban differences exist.

An obvious weakness of the typology is that it is county-based and treats entire counties as if they were uniform. Counties—especially those which cover large areas—contain more and less rural areas within them. In states such as Maine, in which the largest county exceeds the combined areas of Connecticut and Rhode Island, the USDA schema will need to be supplemented by state-devised sub-county categories. The USDA classification could be strengthened, also, by designating the type of metro area to which a nonmetro county is adjacent. Even without these improvements the USDA typology, for most parts of the United States, should provide a substantial improvement over other commonly used conceptions of rural and urban.

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