

The Self-Esteem of Rural Children

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Citation: Yang, R. K. and Fetsch, R. J. (2007, June 15). The self-esteem of rural children. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(5). Retrieved [date] from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/22-5.pdf>

The self-esteem of children in small towns was assessed. Comparing these children's self-rated competencies to extant norms suggests that rural children's self-perceptions are not distinctly different from suburban and urban children. Rural children's feelings of self-worth and self-assessments of scholastic competence are comparable to or higher than metropolitan norms. Rural children display the same decrement in self-ratings of physical appearance as they grow older—girls more so than boys—as do urban children. Rural and urban boys rate themselves higher in athletic competence than girls. The impact of rural/urban differences on children may be less marked than suspected.

Many Americans believe that valuable qualities are inherent in rural communities: Small towns are pastoral, cohesive, friendly, and unhurried (e.g., Brehm, Eisenhauer, & Krannich, 2004). These beliefs can include romanticized images of rural life (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Logan, 1996), whether they are “pro-rural” or “anti-urban” (Jackson, 1980; Rowley, 1996). Although the pastoral image is held mostly by those living in urban and suburban America, the image is sometimes held by rural families themselves, despite their awareness of a harsher reality (Hansen, 1987; Nelson & Smith, 1999).

Rural communities have changed. Rural areas are diverse (Adams, 2003) and the actual differences and similarities between rural and urban communities are multifaceted and complex. Census data indicate that in comparison to Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), rural areas have lower median family-household and per-capita incomes, higher poverty rates for families and individuals, and higher unemployment rates. Rural families have become smaller

and more frequently comprise single or divorced parents. Also, gang and drug-related crime have increased in rural communities (Bachus, 1994; Kingery, Mirzaee, & Pruitt, 1991; Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1995), but remain lower than MSAs. Recent surveys of nationally representative samples suggest that among adults, self-reports of mental stress and poor physical health are no different in rural and metropolitan areas (MMWR, 2004, 2005). Thus, in some ways, contemporary rural communities have become more similar to metropolitan areas (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992; MacTavish & Salamon, 2003).

Yet, standard census data comparing these areas might not adequately reflect the social and psychological challenges faced by contemporary rural communities (cf. Champion & Hugo, 2004). A loss of tax base accompanied by a decrease in professional-level jobs and an increase in low-level jobs (Lyson & Falk, 1993) has been acutely felt by these communities (Sharp & Parisi, 2003), and some struggle to sustain their communal identities (Bushnell, 1999; Edmondson, 2001). Lichter, Roscigno, and Condrón (2003) summarized studies indicating that rural poverty more often involves the “working poor” and two-parent families. These families are less likely to receive cash public assistance or welfare, less ethnic and geographical segregation is apparent among these poor families, and poverty is more likely to be of longer duration. Rural families also have broader responsibilities (than metropolitan families), especially for care of elderly dependents (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003). These responsibilities make it more difficult for modern rural families to retain the romanticized virtues of small-town living (Nelson & Smith, 1999). This irony is perhaps best

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following Cooperative Extension County Agents: Lorri Arnhold, Jim Carey, Wendell Cooper, Steve Cramer, Elaine Crumpton, Lance Earley, Bernie Elliott, Kelly Gulley, Georgia Hoffman, Connie LaBarr, Robert Salzer, and Alan Swartz. We thank Elizabeth Kuhn-Wilken for editorial assistance.

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represented by Davidson's (1990, p. 170) use of the phrase "broken heartland" to describe these communities.

Children are the veritable canaries in the mine. How they fare can portend the future of their communities. Lichter et al. (2003) were particularly concerned about how the changes in rural communities have impacted intra-familial functioning, especially whether children were receiving the nurturance (that they should) or suffering, perhaps indirectly, the effects of parental stress (cf. Adams, 2003; Conger & Elder, 1994). These children could be a leading indicator of the health of their communities in 20 years.

Traditionally, the social support systems of rural children included extended family and community members (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003); this is one unique aspect of "small-town living" lionized by Hillary Rodham Clinton (1996). But, MacTavish and Salamon (2003) contend that this has changed. Rural children now depend primarily on support from direct family members and peer-friends and have decreased their routinized interaction with older kin. This is because kin (e.g., grandparents, uncles, aunts, older siblings) are working, often out of town and with extended commute-times (Perry-Jenkins & Salamon, 2002). Metropolitan children, who have had little contact with older kin to begin with, have not experienced this shift away from extended family and communal support. MacTavish and Salamon (2003) argue that when these extended ties are severed for rural children, the shift is more impactful. For example, "latch-key" situations may be more frequent among rural than urban children, and police/adolescent youth relations in rural communities may become less informal and relaxed than in the past (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003).

These changes in support systems ostensibly affect children's academic performance, and, to the extent that the changes are disruptive, children should be negatively influenced. Roscigno and Crowley (2001) note that the academic performance of rural children typically lags behind that of metropolitan children. Roscigno and Crowley (2001) attribute this to the diminishing tax base in rural areas which results in the under-funding of rural school districts. What usually follows are inadequate facilities, difficulty in keeping highly qualified teachers, and generally poor classroom environments. Beaulieu, Israel, and Wimberley (2003) note that little is provided to encourage rural children's long-range academic achievement. However, a recent analysis suggests that some rural elementary schools actually outperform metropolitan schools (Reeves & Bylund, 2005), and by high school, the academic performance of rural youth is comparable to urban and suburban youth (Fan & Chen, 1999). Thus, it is unclear whether the impact of contextual changes in social support for rural children is affecting their academic performance, either positively or negatively.

Our interest was not in describing the academic performance of children under these ostensible influences,

but in examining the impact of these influences on a more substantial aspect of rural children's day-to-day lives: their feelings of self-worth and self-perceptions of their competencies in several areas, including academic performance. Children's self-perceptions are the basis of self-esteem and are important mediators of their actions and reactions to their surroundings (Harter, 1999). Differences between metropolitan and rural children in these mediators could help clarify the putative differences in academic performance. The purpose of our study was to examine the self-assessed competencies of rural children and to determine whether there are grade-related changes.

Method

Participants

Participants were children in the third through seventh grades from rural areas of a western state. All participants were from towns with populations averaging 5,100 residents (range: 400 to 10,000). County Cooperative Extension Agents recruited participants through schools or 4-H clubs. A variety of 4-H programs are offered in school buildings, often during the school day. Extension agents (and the volunteers working with them) are familiar faces to children, most of whom participate in 4-H programs. The programs add interesting extra-curricular activities that these rural school districts could often not support themselves. Because 4-H programs are held in the school buildings, even children who are not members are aware of them. In addition, county fairs are important community events, and most residents attend them. Thus, 4-H is very familiar to those in rural areas of this state, even to those who do not participate directly in its programs.

Classroom teachers or 4-H activities coordinators recruited participants. In either case, an adult familiar to the children asked them to participate. Although we do not have data on the proportion of children declining participation, we believe the percentage was low.

United States Census Bureau data indicate that these children lived in rural communities that were distinctive from adjacent MSAs. Median family household income for rural families was less (\$28,892 vs. \$41,084), as was per-capita income (\$11,671 vs. \$16,520). Poverty rates were higher for rural individuals (15.4% vs. 9.9%) and rural families (11% vs. 9%), and rural unemployment rates were higher (4.1% vs. 3.8%). However, rural crime was lower (major offenses, 0.29% vs. 0.75%; other offenses, 0.82% vs. 1.21%). There were a greater percentage of Hispanics (14.9% vs. 12.1%) in these rural areas, but a lower percentage of other ethnic minorities (7.8% vs. 13.3%).

The homes in rural areas also differed from homes in adjacent MSAs. More rural homes were without kitchens

(1.4% vs. 0.5%), indoor plumbing (1.3% vs. 0.4%), and lacked telephones (4.9% vs. 2.9%). But more rural homes possessed three or more vehicles (21% vs. 18.3%).

Census data also indicate that occupational activities were not substantially different between these rural areas and their adjacent MSAs. Retail trades were the modal occupation in rural areas and MSAs. Thereafter, for rural areas, durable-goods manufacturing and educational services were the most common jobs; for MSAs, professional services, finance, and real estate were most common. This employment picture is consistent with Perry-Jenkins and Salamon's (2002) finding that, because of the decrease in family-based agricultural production, many rural adults commute long distances to wage-level jobs.

A total of 1,469 children participated in the study. Approximately half were 4-H members; 58% were female. As for grade distribution, there were 306 third graders, 513 fourth graders, 341 fifth graders, 173 sixth graders, and 136 seventh graders. Children in this sample lived in 12 of the state's 64 counties but primarily outside of the high population-density eastern slope.

Sixty-nine percent of the participants did not report their ethnicity. Among those who did report, 83% were White, 9% were Hispanic, 3% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.4% were Black, 4% reported an "other" ethnicity, and none were Asian/Pacific Islander. Aside from the lower percentage of Hispanic participants, this ethnic distribution is consistent with census data for these areas.

Measures

All children responded to Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC) (Harter, 1982, 1985). The SPPC is a widely used scale that measures the general and componential aspects of self-esteem in children. The SPPC assesses self-perceptions in five domains (Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance, and Behavioral Conduct) and a generalized self-perception called Global Self-Worth. The scale uses a unique forced-choice format that discourages socially desirable responding. Persons administering the questionnaire were specially trained to help children understand and use correctly the response format.

The Harter data, to which we compare our findings (i.e., Table 1), are from four Colorado samples presented in the testing manual (Harter, 1985). Harter's samples were drawn from lower middle-class to upper middle-class neighborhoods in urban and suburban areas that were approximately 90% Caucasian.

Results

Cronbach alpha reliabilities for the SPPC scale were acceptable (.74 to .79) for all five domains and Global Self-

Worth. Presented in Table 1 are mean scores, *SDs*, and *ns* for each grade and gender, comparing the self-concept scores of this rural sample to Harter's (1985) metropolitan norms. For each grade and gender, one-sample *t*-tests were computed comparing the sample mean to Harter's norms. Of 60 *t*-tests, 16 were statistically significant. Because Bonferroni adjustments can increase Type 2 errors and denigrate interpretable and meaningful differences (Perneger, 1998), we did not conduct them. Cohen's *d* computed for each statistically significant mean difference generated moderate effect sizes, with a mean *d* of 0.36 (range: 0.17 – 0.59).

The pattern of significant differences indicated rural children's generally higher level of Global Self-Worth and Scholastic Competence. Most striking, rural sixth grade girls rated themselves higher than Harter's norms in every area (Global Self-Worth, Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, and Physical Appearance) except Behavioral Conduct.

One of the purposes of our study was to determine whether there are developmental changes in rural elementary children's perceptions of their competencies or gender differences. There were no statistically significant changes from Grade 3 to Grade 7 in children's self-ratings of Global Self-Worth, Scholastic Competence, and Social Competence. However, univariate analyses of variance found one significant grade trend and three significant gender differences in three domains of self-concept: Athletic Competence, Behavioral Conduct, and Physical Appearance. In Athletic Competence, boys in all grades rated themselves significantly higher than girls rated themselves ($F(1, 1290) = 58.97, p < .001$); in Behavioral Conduct, girls considered themselves better behaved than boys considered themselves ($F(1, 1292) = 40.43, p < .001$); in self-rated Physical Appearance, a significant decrease occurred between the third and seventh grade for boys and girls ($F(4, 1285) = 4.63, p = 0.001$); however, girls of all ages rated themselves lower in physical appearance than boys rated themselves ($F(1, 1285) = 24.41, p < .001$).

Discussion

Self-esteem comprises self-assessed competencies that contribute to a generalized sense of self-worth (Harter, 1999). The purpose of our study was to evaluate the self-assessed competencies of rural children. Because self assessments form the core of self-esteem, especially for children (Harter, 1999), we thought we could find in rural children's assessments of themselves a reflection of the ostensible changes occurring in rural communities and, importantly, a portent of these communities' futures.

Although an agricultural context, a less hurried pace, and a sense-of-place putatively characterize these small towns, demographic data indicate a more problematic life in these communities (Adams, 2003; Bachus, 1994; Bushnell,

Table 1
Mean self-esteem levels for Harter's norms compared to rural children

Grade	3		4		5		6		7	
	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys
Global Self-Worth										
Norm (<i>M</i>)	2.79	2.98	3.13	2.85	2.85	3.19	3.06	3.12	2.99	3.22
Rural (<i>M</i>)	3.16 ^a	3.26 ^a	3.16	3.24 ^a	3.20 ^a	3.19	3.26 ^b	3.20	3.07	3.21
Rural <i>SD</i>	0.59	0.62	0.66	0.66	0.63	0.65	0.62	0.63	0.67	0.71
Rural <i>n</i>	118	121	222	196	170	103	102	36	71	40
Scholastic Competence										
Norm (<i>M</i>)	2.79	2.75	2.85	2.69	2.79	2.85	2.87	3.01	2.87	2.82
Rural (<i>M</i>)	2.91 ^d	2.90 ^c	2.89	2.95 ^a	3.00 ^a	3.05 ^d	3.12 ^a	2.91	3.06 ^d	2.98
Rural <i>SD</i>	0.65	0.65	0.69	0.73	0.62	0.67	0.63	0.64	0.66	0.68
Rural <i>n</i>	118	121	222	196	170	103	102	36	71	40
Social Acceptance										
Norm (<i>M</i>)	2.89	2.96	2.86	2.98	2.97	3.09	2.90	3.00	3.03	2.98
Rural (<i>M</i>)	2.85	2.94	2.86	3.00	2.94	3.02	3.08 ^c	2.94	2.89	3.01
Rural <i>SD</i>	0.70	0.72	0.77	0.70	0.72	0.71	0.67	0.61	0.73	0.75
Rural <i>n</i>	118	121	222	196	170	103	102	36	71	40
Athletic Competence										
Norm (<i>M</i>)	2.67	2.96	2.66	2.99	2.77	3.04	2.59	3.08	2.55	3.13
Rural (<i>M</i>)	2.65	2.96	2.60	3.08	2.76	3.02	2.79 ^b	3.08	2.70	2.92 ^d
Rural <i>SD</i>	0.61	0.65	0.63	0.67	0.63	0.66	0.63	0.52	0.72	0.62
Rural <i>n</i>	118	121	222	196	170	103	102	36	71	40

Continued

Table 1 continued

Grade	3		4		5		6		7	
	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys
Physical Appearance										
Norm (<i>M</i>)	3.01	3.17	2.90	3.12	2.90	3.02	2.55	3.01	2.50	2.93
Rural (<i>M</i>)	2.97	3.19	2.87	3.08	2.85	3.05	2.82 ^a	3.07	2.58	2.93
Rural <i>SD</i>	0.77	0.71	0.78	0.73	0.72	0.70	0.66	0.56	0.66	0.83
Rural <i>n</i>	118	121	222	196	170	103	102	36	71	40
Behavioral Conduct										
Norm (<i>M</i>)	3.08	2.93	3.09	2.92	3.10	2.88	3.16	2.85	3.05	2.83
Rural (<i>M</i>)	3.08	2.89	3.14	2.88	3.08	2.89	3.14	2.83	3.19	2.79
Rural <i>SD</i>	0.61	0.68	0.60	0.67	0.59	0.65	0.66	0.57	0.57	0.54
Rural <i>n</i>	118	121	222	196	170	103	102	36	71	40

Note: Norms are interpolated from Harter (1985, p. 15). *SDs* were comparable between the norms and the rural sample.
^a $p < .001$; ^b $p < .005$; ^c $p < .010$; ^d $p < .05$.

1999; Conger & Elder, 1994; Edmonson, 2001; Kingery et al., 1991; Lichter et al., 2003; Lyson & Falk, 1993; MacTavish & Salamon, 2003; MMWR, 2004, 2005; Sharp & Parisi, 2003; Weisheit et al., 1995). Davidson (1990) has written of the disintegration that has come to rural families and communities. Thus, there are reasons why children's self-assessed competencies should be affected, and probably negatively, by the deteriorating social environments in these rural communities. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), contextual influences on children are powerful and include forces that are not proximal to the child.

Nevertheless, the children in our rural sample had feelings of generalized self-worth that were not lower than Harter's urban norms (Harter, 1985). In fact, in 5 of 10 comparisons for boys and girls from the third to the seventh grades, rural children had self-worth levels significantly above urban norms. Furthermore, rural children's reports of their scholastic competence were, in 7 of 10 comparisons, significantly higher than Harter's urban norms. Since children's self-reports of academic performance substantially reflect their objective performance (Crockett, Schulenberg, & Petersen, 1987), we speculate that our results are consistent with recent studies showing at least comparable

academic performance in rural and metropolitan children (e.g., Fan & Chen, 1999), if not higher performance in rural children (Reeves & Bylund, 2005).

The decline in rural boys' and girls' self-ratings of physical appearance is consistent with the popular hypothesis about the damaging effects of popular media's emphasis on sexuality and precocious sexualization, especially in girls (Pipher, 1995). Our findings suggest that the phenomenon has extended its reach beyond the urban and suburban world, and has even reached rural boys. The decline is probably associated with these developing children's increasing self-consciousness about their physical appearance. Pipher argues that children are bombarded with sexualized images in virtually all media; she especially decries the way these images encourage precocious mimicry. We cannot address whether these rural children's concern is a normal developmental process or exacerbated by the phenomena Pipher discusses. Whatever the case, it seems an unnecessary anxiety for these rural children.

Similarly, the gender differences across all grades in self-ratings of athletic competence and behavioral conduct are consistent with long-standing gender stereotypes and with Harter's normative data (Harter, 1982, 1985).

Despite the myriad challenges facing rural communities (Adams, 2003; Bachus, 1994; Conger & Elder, 1994; Davidson, 1990; Kingery et al., 1991; Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992; Lyson & Falk, 1993; MacTavish & Salamon, 2003; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004; Weisheit et al, 1995), rural children do not appear to suffer a negative general impact: They have feelings of general self-worth and academic competence that are higher than the norm. That said, these rural children have increasing concerns about their physical appearance, similar to metropolitan children (Pipher, 1995). Thus, the ostensible impact of community disintegration is more differentiated. Rural living could still provide some protection from the travail of urban life.

Bronfenbrenner (1958) hypothesized long ago that socialization practices flow from urban middle-class parents to rural working-class parents. Rural children's loss of confidence in their physical appearance is consistent with Pipher's (1995) description of that phenomenon in metropolitan girls, and this finding is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's hypothesis. Perhaps rural parents allow their children access to the fashions of urban youth and view this allowance as an inexpensive concession to their children. But these parents do not yield in areas that they feel are important, specifically their children's sense of who they are and their academic commitments. We found rural children had feelings of general self-worth and academic competence that were above the urban norm. In these specific areas, Bronfenbrenner's (1958) hypothesis is not supported. The possibility that rural parents are selective in what they accept as the incoming tide of metropolitan influence seems reasonable. Our findings may quiet recent sounds of alarm, such as Davidson's (1990) comparison between the disintegration of rural communities and the decay of inner-city neighborhoods. At least in terms of children's feelings of self-worth and academic competence, rural communities may still be safe harbors.

Perhaps rural communities are aware of what they have given up, and yet, they have not yielded on some values that they consider especially important. For their children, these values might be the kinds of support essential for thriving: support that enhances self-esteem and academic achievement. It would be interesting to know what kinds of social support rural children receive that contributes to their feelings of self-esteem and academic competence and whether that support differs from urban children.

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