

RURAL SOCIOLOGY IN 1967

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A number of issues have been raised in discussions about the current status of rural sociology. One chronic question that arises is whether there should be a rural sociology at all, and the implication is that (1) "real" sociologists can do whatever rural sociologists do without having to be so identified, and (2) the proportion of farmers in the population is decreasing anyway.

A number of points, however, warrant consideration. For example, rural sociology in more recent times has moved in the direction of concern with developing nations, and rural sociologists often are involved in cross-cultural and foreign studies. Additionally, the substantive nature of rural sociology has, in domestic concerns, often become more oriented towards the operation of the semi-rural family, marginal farms, rural minority groups, and other developments that have accompanied the great industrial and agricultural shifts of the last generation. Indeed only a small proportion of the writings of rural sociologists has ever been directed to farming *per se* (Sewell, 1965). While the character of rural life is surely changing, aspects of the population which are not urban have persisted, and indeed some of the changes occurring outside the urban centers have provided intriguing opportunities for research. Many of these may have been lost because of the small numbers of professional sociologists conducting rural sociological research.

This note presents an overview of rural sociology courses and the men who are behind them.

Rural Sociology Courses. Some of these questions have recently come to the fore in the discussion of how much and what kinds of teaching occur in rural sociology. A myth has been encountered, for example, that the course has literally disappeared from the face of the earth, and thus there is no purpose other than an historical survival for the continuation of production of text materials for rural sociology. In order to examine this type of common attitude, a very small research was conducted as follows. Using the current directory of the Rural Sociological Society, a 20 per cent sample of members listed as Active or Joint was selected. The means was to pick every fifth person listed. A questionnaire was sent to the person selected if he had an academic address or if on the basis of preliminary examination it was judged that his address could be associated with an academic enterprise or institution. Arbitrarily, 11 names

were removed from consideration on this basis. An additional 15 names were removed on the grounds that they involved a foreign address (but Canadian addresses were retained). The total number of questionnaires sent out, thus, representing in theory 20 per cent of the viable academic community, was 60 questionnaires. The questionnaire was a simple one-page form asking: "During this academic year, will you teach a course titled Rural Sociology?" If the respondent answered no he was then asked: "If No, will you teach a course with a similar title or one that covers the basic content of a course titled Rural Sociology?" Additional information was asked in regard to the number and level of classes, and respondents were asked also to indicate the number of other courses of rural sociology taught in the same institution.

Of the 60 questionnaires sent out, 49 were returned. Eighteen of the 49 respondents, or roughly 36 per cent, indicated that they were teaching a course titled Rural Sociology, or one having essentially the content of a course so titled. Of the 18 who were teaching such a course, seven were teaching more than one course each academic year.

In addition, 22 of the respondents indicated that others in their institution were also teaching a course titled Rural Sociology or having the basic content of such a course. There is some ambiguity involved in judging the total number of such courses, as obviously some people reported the entire Rural Sociology Department offering, while others interpreted the notion more narrowly in the sense of a special course on rural sociology.

Thus, it is clear that a course in rural sociology exists, and surely a substantial proportion of sociologists believe that there is a reasonable organization of subject matter around such a concept. This is underscored by the fact that more than 10,000 copies have been sold of just one recent text in rural sociology, first published less than five years ago.

Who Are the Rural Sociologists? To document the continued viability of courses in rural sociology is to raise the question of the composition and activities of the roster of those identifying themselves as rural sociologists. Complete answers could be provided only by an expensive study. We have not done this, but a few items are available from

tabulations of data in directories of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) (1967), of the American Sociological Association (ASA) (1967), and from the society's journal, *Rural Sociology* (1967). An interesting picture emerges. In 1967, there were about 900 members of the RSS, reflecting an average growth rate of 6.6 per cent per year over the last five years. The RSS has six major membership categories. For our purposes, the most important groupings are Students, Associates, and all others which we shall call "Actives." The distribution is: "Actives"—54 per cent; Students—25 per cent; and Associates—21 per cent. The great majority of the Associates—few of whom are also members of the American Sociological Association—appear to be about equally divided between foreign sociologists and United States professionals from disciplines other than sociology (such as anthropology, agricultural economics and geography). With some important exceptions the Students and Associates are not the core of the society.

Indeed, the core must be sought among the "Actives." The latter were about equally divided between those who are "Regulars" of the American Sociological Association (all Fellows and Active members) and those who were not. The majority of the RSS "Actives" who are not "Regulars" of the ASA are not ASA members. We come then to an interesting division among the "Actives" of the RSS: those who are Fellows of the ASA and who are thus professional American sociologists, and those who are not associated with the ASA and are presumably little interested in the main body of American sociology.

Is there, then, a division of the RSS leadership between true sociologists and "rural" sociologists? The answer is no. A tabulation of the RSS "Actives" who are not members of the ASA shows that almost all of the latter are either professionals trained in other fields or are foreign sociologists especially interested in rural societies. The core of the RSS consists of those who are most deeply involved in its decision-making processes. A count of recent past presidents and the members of the Council and the standing committees shows almost all to be Fellows or Actives of the ASA. The two exceptions are Ph.D.'s in sociology who are not Americans and who do not reside in the United States.

We now look at the question of leadership from the standpoint of articles published in the journal *Rural Sociology* (all refereed, of course). We find that of a total of 75 such research articles published from 1964–1967, only ten did not have at least one author who was a Fellow or Active member of the American Sociological Association. Almost all of these ten were apparently foreign sociologists or were from other related disciplines. All but ten of the 65 ASA members were "Actives" of the RSS.

It is clear, then, that the main rural sociologists are also professional sociologists. There are more than 200 American "Actives" in the RSS who are "Regulars" of the ASA. What are their departmental affiliations? As of early 1968 there are only about a dozen academic departments which include the words "Rural Sociology" in their names. Of these, four are formally independent departments of rural sociology, and each of these is closely linked to a department of sociology within the same university. It is therefore not surprising to learn that only about one quarter of the 200 or so who are RSS "Actives" and ASA "Regulars" are members

of departments of rural sociology (whether independent or not), and that many of these have joint appointments in departments of sociology. In fact more than half of these Americans who form the heart of the rural sociology group are members of departments of sociology (sometimes combined with anthropology or economics). About forty of the RSS core have nonacademic employment, mostly government, while less than 20 are employed in academic departments which do not include sociology in their titles.

Conclusion

In a few words, we find that the field of rural sociology is quite active today. Courses on the topic are taught in quite a few American universities and colleges, and the Rural Sociological Society is growing. There are few American professional rural sociologists who are not also "general" sociologists. There are, however, quite a few American non-sociologists who are active members of the Society, and there are many participants in the American rural sociological enterprise who are not citizens or residents of the United States. We infer that work of American rural sociologists contributes not only to domestic sociology but also to a broader range of interests including foreign sociology and social science other than sociology on the domestic scene.

Some appear to believe that a sharp division exists between rural and other sociologists. Clearly this was not the case among those who formed the core of rural sociology in 1967. It is more accurate to say that quite a few sociologists are interested in rural phenomena. Because some of the nation's most poignant social problems either emanate from or are characteristic of rural society, and because many other countries are experiencing shock waves as their rural populations establish contact with a wider society, we can expect the sociology of rural life to be an active topic of research, writing, and teaching for the foreseeable future.¹

References

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¹ Whether this work will be especially noticeable on the sociological scene is another question. There is no reason to believe that the average sociologist—of whatever subfield—adds much to knowledge. Rural sociologists are doubtless no exception. Probably not more than a fraction of the 200-odd American professional sociologists of the RSS will make notable contributions, and when they do so, their work will not necessarily be identified as rural sociological. Besides, on a sheer probability basis, the works of these people will be vastly outnumbered by the works of the rest of the sociologists. But then the same may be said for any other specialty of so broad a field as sociology.