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RURAL SOCIOLOGY AND RURAL SOCIAL WORK:
AN HISTORICAL ESSAY¹

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between rural sociology and rural social work can be traced back to the days of the Country Life Commission (1908), and has experienced many fluctuations throughout the years. This paper examines the interconnections between the developments in the two fields, drawing from historical data which lead to the hypothesis that those fluctuations were caused by forces within each discipline as well as by developments affecting the interactions of each field with the other. It appears that academic and theoretical issues were not alone in causing contention in the relationship between rural sociology and the practice of rural social work. Political moods and market priorities were equally influential.

INTRODUCTION

A unique feature of rural social work in the seventies has been a renewed emphasis on dialogue with rural sociologists, especially those in the Agricultural Extension Service. Some aspects of this dialogue have been documented in the literature (Demerath, 1977; Deaton, 1977; Gibbons, 1977).² Rural Social Work's only publication Human Services in the Rural Environment (HSITRE) further illustrates the results of

¹I am indebted to my colleagues, Roy C. Buck, Professor of Sociology and Donald Crider, Associate Professor of Rural Sociology at The Pennsylvania State University for their comments and suggestions.

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joint efforts between the two fields. This journal which began in 1976 was a publication of the University of Wisconsin Extension until recently, when the University of Tennessee School of Social Work assumed responsibility for its continuation. There were many other rural forums and collections of rural social work papers which boasted the names of distinguished sociologists and social workers cooperating in the study and resolution of the social problems of the country.

The student of the history of rural sociology and rural social work alike will hasten to point out that these cooperative endeavors are not a novel phenomenon. The relationship between rural sociology and rural social work can be traced to the days of the Country Life Commission (1908). In fact, rural social work and rural sociology claim identical ancestry in the figures of some of the early rural pioneers who were both social philosophers and budding social scientists of practical orientation. It will be the purpose of this paper to examine fluctuations in the relationship between rural sociology and rural social work from the beginning days of both fields to present years. Interconnections between the developments in the two fields will be drawn from descriptive data provided by the literature.

RURAL SOCIOLOGY AND RURAL SOCIAL WORK: THE PRE-DISCIPLINARY PERIOD

Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life

Widespread exploitation of lands, forests and natural rural resources in the United States had gone virtually unchecked for many decades after the Civil War. The battle for government control over natural resources was futile until the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt's chief forester, Gifford Pinchot, succeeded in mobilizing public support for efforts of conservationists and gave impetus to needed legislation, much of which is claimed to have set the stage for the discipline of rural sociology. "But the most important event for rural sociology," says Lowry Nelson, "was the appointment in 1908 of the Commission on Country Life" (1969:9). Roosevelt perceived this commission to be "the full twin brother of his National Conservation Commission and the Human side of the conservation movement" (p. 9).

It is not by accident that historians of rural social work also claim the Country Life Commission as the midwife of rural social work practice. Merwin Swanson suggests that the idyllic view of the country held by most nineteenth century urban social workers was only dispelled through the efforts of country lifers who "...convinced a handful of social work leaders that social welfare problems in rural areas were as urgent as those in cities" (1972:515). And so it is that the early ancestry of both rural sociology and rural social work is embodied in figures such as Liberty Hyde Bailey, Dean of Cornell University College of Agriculture and President of the Commission on Country Life, Kenyon L. Butterfield, President of Massachusetts State College, who assembled data on rural life and declared that the same problems which existed in the cities were to be found in the country where they were likely overlooked because of the urban emphasis of social work practice (Bailey, 1908; Butterfield, 1913).

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, rural sociology had not yet been established as a separate discipline but the road had been paved by the Country Life Commission which was "the first important milestone on the way to the establishment of the rural social sciences" (Nelson, 1969:12). Rural Sociology is a uniquely American academic phenomenon of highly practical orientation. This was the kind of discipline social workers could comfortably utilize in their ameliorative efforts. The creed of the early evangelizers of rural sociology was akin to that of social workers, in spite of the fact that, at the time, the first group stressed community betterment through collective efforts and the latter group collective improvement through individual remediation.

Common Ancestors and Their Creed

Looking more closely at the thinking of the early common ancestors of rural sociology and rural social welfare, we discover that Bailey emphasized retaining local institutions, strengthening community life, and even dividing large farms to help achieve these results. Bailey was an advocate of "rural betterment" and "community action" and, in that sense, his words are echoed by contemporary social workers. Butterfield was equally evangelical in his social philosophy. He was a deeply religious man. He saw the farm problem as a social problem and stressed the need for remedial measures including "better organization, fuller and richer education, quicker communication." Butterfield emphasized definition of and education in rural sociology. Because he was more theoretically inclined than Bailey, he is a more

pleasing ancestor to modern rural sociologists. But Butterfield also emphasized remediation, and in that sense, his statements are equally congruent with those of his social welfare descendants. Politically, both figures were socially minded and progressive, concerned with improving the health, welfare, and happiness of rural people, and with preserving the country for the working farmer rather than for exploitative nonworking private owners. These were the men who advised Theodore Roosevelt and who, like Gifford Pinchot, twice Pennsylvania governor, and Benton MacKaye, regional planner, Harvard professor, originator of the Appalachian Trail and a founder of the Wilderness Society, were concerned with conserving not only natural but also human values and resources.

It is important to point out that while social workers claim the early rural sociologists as significant forebears, rural sociologists also recognize the early nurturing influence of pioneer social workers. Edmund de S. Brunner points out in The Birth of a Science that "although precise information about the inception of American rural sociological research is lost in the limbo of things unrecorded, certain events and personalities were clearly highly influential, though not specifically concerned with rural problems" (1957:1). Among those events, Brunner lists: (1) urban social workers who "increasingly stressed the need to prevent pathological conditions... instead of concentrating on the amelioration of such conditions;" (2) women of good will who as early as 1905 undertook study of wages and living conditions of unmarried mothers and skilled laborers; (3) the thorough social surveys sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation which aimed at "coordination of civic action and social investigations;" and (4) the influence of a number of churchmen who devoted themselves to rural social problems and convinced the public that something was amiss with rural life (1957:1-2). An analysis of the tools and objectives of those precursors of rural sociology makes it evident that they functioned from an interdisciplinary perspective in their preoccupation with rural social institutions. Sociology gave them tools and methods (surveys and observation); social work and social philosophy legitimized their objectives (remediation and improvement of individual and social conditions). It is evident that the predisciplinary period in rural sociology was oriented to problem solving and rural policy formulation. Distinctions between its practice and that of rural social work were minimal.³

³The period which I am describing as "predisciplinary" coincides with the decades which Galpin has named "humanitarian and conference and survey" stages of rural sociology (Galpin, 1938).

THE EARLY DISCIPLINARY PERIOD AND THE DEPRESSION YEARS:
COOPERATION AND SUPPORT

Rural Sociologists Organize

The next step was the establishment of rural sociology as a separate discipline from general sociology. In 1912, the American Sociological Society chose "Rural Life" as the theme of its annual meeting. "During its sessions, twelve persons interested primarily in rural sociology assembled in a hotel room. From this meeting grew annual information gatherings, which eventually expanded into the rural section of the Society and then into "The Rural Sociological Society" (Brunner, 1957:3). Early members of the Society were Kenyon L. Butterfield, whose practical orientation has already been mentioned; Warren H. Wilson who was involved with the country church department of the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions; Charles J. Galpin of Wisconsin and Edmund de S. Brunner, who was to become a long time associate of rural social welfare.

The time was ripe for an organizing move among rural sociologists. In 1911, the American Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities had recommended the inclusion of "strong courses" in rural sociology for the purpose of raising "the college courses in agriculture above the materialistic plane" and emphasizing "the vital connection between agricultural science and the welfare of rural people" (Nelson, 1969:20). Rural sociology was thus born as an independent discipline strongly rooted in a problem solving, practical, and social-reform orientation.

One other manifested tradition in the early days of rural sociology was the religious orientation. Charles Otis Gill, Warren H. Wilson, and Gifford Pinchot were all pastoral in their aspirations. In 1919, they all became involved with the Inter-Church World Movement. They were very much committed to the resolution of the social welfare problems of farmers as a way to secure a better spiritual life for all countrymen. Gifford Pinchot, in particular, became a regular contributor to the Survey, the most prominent forum for social work in the early decades of the 20th Century. He was one of the most influential national spokesmen for the enactment of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933, perhaps the most important piece of legislation to influence the creation of social work delivery centers in the interior of the country.

Between 1911 and 1930, rural sociologists and social workers cooperated in several studies conducted by the Children's Bureau and the United States Department of Labor which brought about important knowledge and reforms in the child labor laws. During the early thirties, many community organizers utilized material developed by rural sociologists, Dwight Sanderson in particular, whose Department of Rural Social Organization at Cornell University included programs in rural recreation, community organization, rural leadership, and rural dramatics.

Cementing Cooperation

In 1930, Sanderson published an article in Rural America entitled "Trends and Problems in Rural Social Work." Sanderson suggested that the child welfare worker was the pioneer agent for rural social work. "Inevitably," he wrote with conviction, "the child welfare agent meets many problems of family adjustment and before long she is engaged in a general program of social work" (1930:4). Sanderson was instrumental in bringing about better understanding for the role of the trained professional social worker.

We have come to understand that we cannot entrust the supervision of public health to anyone but a physician. It is equally important that the baffling problems of adjusting human relationships be entrusted only to those who by study and experience have qualified themselves for such a responsibility (1930:5).

He criticized the common rural practice of entrusting delivery of social work services to local political proteges:

...the public must be educated to understand that these difficult problems of human relations cannot be adequately handled by the furnishing of grocery orders and clothing or medical attendance in emergency, by one whose chief qualification is his or her loyalty to the local political machine, but that they need the service of one who has had the best possible professional training (1930:5).

Finally, Sanderson, like E. C. Branson (1919) and Howard Odum (1926) of North Carolina, advocated county level organization for the social

services, thus pioneering the model to be supported by social workers and operationalized by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration of 1933.

During the Depression years, the coalitions between rural sociologists and rural social workers advanced the cause of basic economic survival of the country and village. Sanderson went to Washington in 1933, "to organize the social research division of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and was instrumental in working out a system of cooperative research in rural social welfare problems between the states and the federal government" (Anderson, 1946:13).

The Depression and New Deal years were "halcyon days" for rural social welfare. Institutionalized relief agencies in remote corners of the nation moved even further to realize that "social work must struggle to lift burdens from those who suffer (so often through no failing of their own) and seek also to correct the basic maladjustments to which this wreckage bears witness" (Chambers 1963:77). And so, some of the caution which community oriented rural sociologists had had in prior years about collaborating with a profession which was ameliorative and oriented to the intrapsychic rather than preventive and directed to the social milieu, increasingly diminished. Brunner pointed out that during the Depression and New Deal years rural sociologists were involved in collaborative studies first under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and later on the Works Progress Administration (Brunner, 1957:99). Sanderson's Rural Sociology and Rural Social Organization (1942), prepared during the Depression years, devoted a full chapter to "Rural Public Welfare Organization." Sanderson was amply familiar with the works of rural workers such as Josephine Brown (1935), Josephine Strode (1940), Mary Ruth Colby (1933), and others whose writings are seminal in rural social work. In 1940, Paul H. Landis published Rural Life in Process with four chapters devoted to rural social welfare. In his preface, Landis acknowledged the collaboration of A. A. Smick, professor at the Graduate School of Social Work of The State College of Washington, for his suggestions and review. Finally, in 1949, Benson Y. Landis published Rural Welfare Services containing not only descriptions of the rural social work field but careful reviews of the rural social work literature published up to then.

Warning Signs and Trauma

It was in the midst of all the collaborative activity that we begin to see the seeds of concern with the theoretical validity of the

studies done by rural sociologists. This concern was to become progressively more serious because of trauma within rural sociology itself, and culminate in the termination of all significant interdisciplinary coalitions with social welfare for many years. Brunner suggested that "in the nature of the case, the emergency permitted little opportunity for developing a theoretical structure for the field of rural sociology" (1957:99-100), and William H. Sewell (1965) stated that most rural sociologists of that period were not doing good empirical research or reporting it well. Sewell further observed that this was probably due to "lack of concern with theoretical and methodological issues and their own interests in amelioration" (1965:441). In fact, sociologists were beginning to conclude that rural sociology was providing valuable insights into complex situations, defining problems and possible remedial measures, but not contributing to the development of "theory" in any sophisticated scientific sense. It was apparent that sociology as a field had begun to express dissatisfaction with the practical orientation of its rural branch, and that theory-building researchers felt that something was amiss within rural sociology. The sociological guild has become status conscious and rural sociology, particularly its practical line, was critically placed in a marginal position vis-a-vis the parent discipline.

FROM POST WAR YEARS TO PRESENT DAYS: DIVORCE AND RE-ALLIANCE

The Case of Rural Sociology

The dilemma of rural sociology had become a delicate matter by 1948. Brunner alluded to it in his presidential address delivered to a joint meeting of the Rural Sociological Society and the American Sociological Society in 1946. Brunner proposed, in conciliatory fashion, that many arguments over the theoretical merit of rural sociological research had been dialectic, based primarily upon the fact that sociologists had wished to emulate the physical science models of research.

We see now, I believe, that our semantic battles were caused in part by the inevitable differences in procedure and material between the so-called physical and social sciences, for all our efforts to copy the former, and between theorists long insured to a drought of research funds and researchers overenthusiastic over their new opportunities (1946:96).

In the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Brunner suggested to the societies that those events should open possibilities for new models of research for sociology. Sociologists had been overconcerned with the hard sciences and had been scorned by them. But the atomic tragedies had caused physical scientists to develop a far more sympathetic understanding of the limitations and difficulties of the social scientist who had to be concerned with what happened to his discoveries in terms of human welfare (Brunner, 1946:97). However, few heeded Brunner's hopes and his suggested new models of research did not get reflected in action. Sociology continued to emulate theory building mechanisms of the physical sciences, and rural sociologists continued to feel the threat of the rigid scientific orientation of the parent discipline.

The trend of rural sociological research away from a problem solving orientation during the decade between 1945 and 1955, and then, further away from a social welfare emphasis between 1956 and 1965 has been documented by Sewell in his "Rural Sociological Research, 1936-1965" (1965). While the category "Social Welfare and Policy" including a wide variety of action oriented topics commanded the greatest research interest during the 1936-1945 period, by the second decade under study, 1946-1955, "entries in this category had dropped to one-sixth" and in the period 1956-1965, "to less than one-twelfth of the published articles" (1965:432). Even more relevant to the understanding of the hypothesis of this paper are Sewell's explanations of the trend:

All in all this brief examination of major areas of interest would seem to indicate the rural sociologists...have shifted away from a consuming interest in rural social problems and policies to major areas of greater sociological interest. This does not mean that they have abandoned their concern with the problems of rural people but that they have tended to see these problems in more sociologically relevant terms as the problems have decreased in their urgency and as rural sociologists have learned to formulate their problem research in more meaningful sociological terms (1965:435). (Emphasis mine).

Theoretical Sophistication and the Practitioner's Quandary

Before analyzing the parallel dilemmas social work was facing and which affected its relationship with rural sociology, it is important

to make reference to another quandary which caused concern within the discipline of rural sociology itself. As rural sociologists grew in theoretical sophistication and meaning in "sociological terms," their findings became less and less relevant to that segment of the discipline which remained involved in practice, namely, the rural sociologist of Extension.

Emory L. Brown presented an intriguing analysis of the sociological practitioner's quandary in "the Professional Practitioner Role of Rural Sociologists" (1967). Brown suggested that "much of the sociological research is of little value to the social practitioner" and of little relevance to the policy-maker since theoretical research tends to assume "that verbal behavior is predictive of overt behavior" (1967:207). Brown bemoans the lack of communication between theory and practice, and utilizing Ernest Greenwood's (1963) notions of "practice theory" (a bible for most social workers), Brown proposes that the "applied field of rural sociology will be effective and useful to the extent that research and practice are appropriately related one to the other" (1967:207). Interestingly enough, Brown utilizes the example of social work to illustrate the need for "research-oriented practitioners and applied-oriented social scientists" (1967:207). He further alludes to the early coalitions between social work and general sociology, their divorce, and their recently attempted collaborative schemes, but falls short of analyzing or proposing similar cooperative efforts between practitioners in rural sociology and their counterparts in rural social work.

The Case of Rural Social Work

We now turn to the field of rural social work after the years of World War II. The war had brought to the country a fair amount of prosperity. Agriculture became a war-necessary industry and for the most part, relief loads in rural areas decreased sharply. The literature showed the disappearance of the "able-bodied" category from the relief loads. However, we have come to learn that the decrease in total number of "able-bodied" recipients was misleading since, for the most part, it indicated an exodus of the young and able from rural areas and a remaining of the elderly and ill, who were labeled The People Left Behind by the 1970 President's Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. During the postwar years, social workers lost interest in rural America. Swanson reported that after 1941, the Survey published fewer than five rural articles until its demise in 1952. The National Conference on Social Welfare and the

Social Service Review followed similar patterns (Swanson, 1972:525). Rural subjects scarcely appeared in the programs at national social work meetings and were but rarely seen in the literature. References to "Rural Social Work" all but disappeared from the Social Work Yearbook, and it was increasingly obvious that the profession had become more concerned with securing the higher status that urban and casework oriented practice could offer than with continuing efforts on behalf of rural populations.

It must be noted, however, that schism which gave rise to two accrediting organizations in social work education between the years of 1942 and 1952, had its roots in the rural-urban dichotomies of existing social work education programs and in the rural-urban animosities of practitioners. The National Association of Schools of Social Administration (NASSA), a proponent of undergraduate education for social work and a supporter of programs located in sociology departments, had been born out of the displeasure of many land-grant universities with the requirements imposed on social work education by the American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW), requirements which were unrealistic for rurally oriented programs. The AASSW represented primarily the large private universities of the east coast and the overt concerns of the profession with improving its educational standards. The two dissenting organizations eventually merged in the Council of Social Work Education in 1952, and much of the rural emphasis which had characterized the NASSA was lost in conciliatory statements which tended to support the high-status aspirations of the profession and the AASSW. Social workers were demanding more training, more autonomy from related disciplines, and more commitment from the worker as an emerging practitioner-theoretician of the social sciences. The notion of coalitions became also threatening to the professional image of social workers who had finally gained independence from sociology, and, so they thought, from psychology as well.

During the sixties, antipoverty programs, national rural commissions organized for the redevelopment of lagging areas, and the advent of the community mental health movement had far reaching consequences for the delivery of social work and other human services to nonmetropolitan America. Social workers became perforce, if not by choice, heavily involved in communities in which they worked. Advisory boards became cognizant of their decision-making powers, and intra- and inter-community relationships solidified, as citizens organized, often regionally, in quest for federal dollars, realizing full well that lack of political organization would deter them from

securing the advantage of federal funds. Finally, social workers and rural sociologists, particularly in Extension, realized that the quality of their jobs and the feasibility of federal funding could be significantly strengthened by collaboration and interdisciplinary efforts.

In 1969, after two decades of oblivion, the National Conference of Social Welfare included once again the rural theme with the participation of Leon Ginsberg, Dean of the School of Social Work of West Virginia University. The 1970's witnessed the establishment of political platforms for rural citizens and a renewed focus on rural social problems (Rural America, the Congressional Rural Caucus, the National Rural Center). Monies began to flow once again to support problem-oriented and social welfare relevant research in rural sociology. Practitioners in Extension began to see their role closer to human services and alliances began to redevelop. Rural sociologists re-introduced questions about practice-relevant research and practice-related training in their professional forums. Questions about the interdisciplinary dimensions of rural social work and the significance of rural sociology for the field re-appeared as a preoccupation of social workers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The historical data examined in this paper lead to the hypothesis that the fluctuations in the relationship between rural sociology and rural social work were caused by forces within each discipline as well as by developments affecting the interactions of each field with the other. It appears from the examination of past events that although academic issues such as the focus and/or nature of theory building for the discipline of sociology were at times important, they were, by no means the only cause of the sometimes amiable and sometimes contentious relationship between problem oriented practitioners and theory oriented academics. As in most areas of investigation and fields of practice, political moods and market priorities often determined the orientation of rural sociology. When governmental demands were heavy and welcomed the efforts of problem solvers, rural sociologists focused upon amelioration in their research. Such was the case during the Depression and New Deal years. Coalitions with rural social workers flourished, and the two fields cooperated and supported each other. When amelioration was no longer a market priority, the two fields drifted apart and engaged in contentious discussions.

Given the present market and economic realities which affect all aspects of rural life, including social science theoreticians and practitioners, it might be suggested that rural sociologists and rural social workers should re-examine avenues which might reduce the often semantic and dialogical tensions of the applied aspects of the fields.

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