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Abstract

The general behavior of a society is not necessarily innate. Its behavior is not forever bound by environment, but rather is conditioned by social tradition.

The Rural Disadvantaged

LEIGHTON G. WATSON*

THE GENERAL BEHAVIOR of a society is not necessarily innate. Its behavior is not forever bound by environment, but rather is conditioned by social tradition. In the course of its history a society builds tradition, rules of behavior, and a stock of folklore and cliches. How it applies these to its environment determines its adjustment to change and its adaptability to progress. Even though tradition is created by members of society and passed on to future generations in seemingly rational ways, we should not conclude that the societal behavior resulting therefrom will remain fixed. It changes as the society is forced to deal with new circumstances.

Any society steeped in the tradition of its own culture is still susceptible to change. External forces help the society make adjustments in its behavior or learning patterns, but the motivation to want change must come from within the society. To assist in the stimulation of that desire, to precipitate the innovative and educational processes which can set the adjustment in motion, to provide the educational programs for action, these are some of the roles of the university extension educator within the society.

Although each extension educator has a specialized educational role, it is extension's collective and coordinated impact on the tradition that will have real educational meaning. Therefore, it is critical that we understand present-day society's efforts toward progress. How will contemporary society influence the role of an extension educator? How can he influence its traditions? How can he influence individual and group behavioral change or learning? Can extension help clients make a rational adjustment to change and learn which traditions to retain and which to discard? To some extension workers it is a problem of communications; to others it is a problem of developing new audience or client

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groups; to still others it is one of insufficient staff resources for the new extension content and program responsibility. It is none of these singly; it does seem to be all of them together.

For instance, let me sketch a societal problem with which I am somewhat familiar. It is the Appalachian problem. The traditions and the culture of the Appalachian society are both advantageous and disadvantageous to that society's advancement and for its adjustment to the larger mass cultural norms of the American Society. On one hand, the family and kinship relationships of that society are desired points of reference often forgotten in the normal, middle-class urban society of America. On the other hand, Appalachia's problems are centered around such items as lack of leadership, inadequate income, past exploitation of its natural resources, the need for technological and economic development, isolation, few growth points, underdeveloped educational systems, the departmentalized nature of its society, and a generally negative attitude in its people toward taxation and economic reform. There is often a lack of citizen involvement in decision making.

The problems of Appalachia, as with most societies, are complex. They require group, rather than singular individual actions for solution.

The society I have briefly outlined implies change in the content and in the method of extension education, if it is to be relevant to contemporary society. The extension focus is shifting from individual decision making to group decision making. It is shifting from the dissemination of subject matter information to consultation on principles and process. The change from the role of expert with solutions to problems, to that of consultant with help in the problem solving process is, like most change, very difficult even within the extension organization. Yet, there is need to deal with problems as well as with academic disciplines per se.

As I progress through this paper, I will make additional references to Appalachia. This is because I know this area best and also because there is much research to draw upon. But Appalachia covers a large area and so should be of concern to many of you. Also, although I will focus on the Appalachian case from time to time, the principles gleaned from analyses of this regional situation have wider applicability (16). In many respects, for example, similar processes of change are occurring in the Ozark

Mountain Region, in various rural low-income areas of both the South and the North, in our Western Indian reservations, and also in the urban ghettos of our large cities. Then, too, rural Appalachia could be regarded as a microcosm of the underdeveloped nations of the world, manifesting many of the problems and strains that are so much a part of the human condition elsewhere. As a matter of fact, our attention to the role of the Extension Service in a changing rural America is especially relevant to programs of directed change in the emerging nations, for the American Extension Service has often been used as a prototype for such programs.

Many of you have participated in these programs in other countries. I returned only a month ago from Afghanistan, a truly underdeveloped country. Each time I have the opportunity to participate in a training program of this kind, I realize all over again the tremendous contribution that has been made by the Cooperative Extension Service to the total development of the United States. I also am positive that an extension program, properly perceived, adapted, and administered, can work wonders in any country.

With these general observations, let us now turn to a discussion of my particular assignment, the "Rural Disadvantaged." I will attempt to describe the nature of these people, who they are, what they are, and what we know about them, drawing upon much of the relevant research. Also, I will interject some implications for action programs. I don't think you can talk about the nature of the problem without discussing implications for future extension programs. In the technical sessions, then, you can make of those implications what you will.

The post World War II era saw the growth of a new kind of rural poor, with different problems and different needs than those which confronted the citizens of rural areas in the earlier years of the century. During the late fifties and early sixties, although some extension programming was directed at the poor, the most isolated and disadvantaged, indeed those who needed help the most, were not reached by extension. In addition, it was recognized that the tried and tested extension programs which had worked well with other client groups would need to be modified, or new programs developed, to work effectively with the "new" rural poor. Thus began, in earnest, the process of seeking information about the rural disadvantaged and ways to help them.

As an example, the Federal Extension Service sponsored several "special needs" projects in different parts of the United States to test approaches to working with different groups of the disadvantaged. In West Virginia, we carried out a five-year pilot project on working with the rural non-farm disadvantaged. (I will draw on some of the evaluation of that project in this discussion.)

There are many deep-seated human factors involved in working with the rural disadvantaged. Many disadvantaged people tend to stay close to home. They are not well assimilated into the larger community and feel insecure outside their own environment. Tradition, habit, hopelessness, folk knowledge, and lack of initiative tend to control their thinking and actions. Many of those who do move find themselves woefully unprepared to adjust to city life (3). Such simple matters as getting to work on time, accepting the noise of machinery, and showing up week after week are too much. Some have to learn about hygiene and how to handle a steady wage.

Such factors limit a person's alternatives in trying to adjust to opportunities of the larger society. And the limitation is even greater when the situation is conditioned by alienation and myths about the poor. In many areas with a concentration of disadvantaged, a kind of poverty environment or culture tends to prevail. This is more than low income; it is a poverty of the spirit as well. "The people think differently; they have a different sense of values than do people of other classes," says the study, *The People Left Behind* (17). Indeed, idleness is a disease, according to a special report prepared by the Kanawha Medical Society, Charleston, West Virginia (19).

One summary of research relating to low-income families identifies four distinctive themes peculiar to the life style of disadvantaged people. All are apparently the result of deprived, alienated living. These are **fatalism** or a fierce feeling of helplessness; **orientation to the present** with a desire to preserve what little security is left by hesitating to take risks; **authoritarianism** or behavior governed by their own rules and regulations; and **concreteness** or something that they can see and understand (6).

A basic fact to keep in mind is that people in poverty are not a homogeneous group. Another pertinent point is that identifying poverty and disadvantaged situations is far more than classifying people by income. It is a matter of personal development and

human resources, including attitudes, abilities, aspirations, health, and life styles.

Contrary to myth, many disadvantaged people do have positive values, ideals, and goals. Deep down they truly want improvement and most of them have absorbed many of the preferences of most Americans (5). Frequently their behavior is not due so much to "their culture" as it is a response to the grinding elements of deprivation and stress placed upon them by the surrounding environment. If you consider the aggressiveness needed in the work-a-day world of today, you will understand why many people lack the courage to leave a world which, though marked by hunger and deprivation, still holds a measure of psychological security.

With this background of generalizations in mind, let us turn to a profile of the Appalachian family that reflects "tendencies." Keep in mind that these "tendencies" can apply to any peoples who are isolated, where there is a lack of expansion possibilities, and a built-in barrier system which cuts people off, not only geographically, but culturally, educationally, psychologically, and economically.

The fact that expansion was not possible in a narrowly circumscribed environment in Appalachia was a factor in culture development. Energies, thus, were directed more toward existence than toward progress (22). It has been a closed-door society and, as a result of its failures, has developed a way of life which turns in upon itself, and which in turn serves as a further causal agent to keep it closed.

One characteristic is the family's strong sense of itself as a unit for training, socializing, and action. The first duty of the individual is toward his kin. (Can you not think of several other societies with the same characteristic?) Members of a family settle close together. As children marry they build homes near to those on whom they depend for so many years. This close inter-relation is a strength to them.

By contrast, middle-class parents bring up their children under the assumption that "to grow up" means that children are able to get along without their parents and family. We plan for our children to be able to live anywhere in the world without us.

This strong familial tie presents some very confusing characteristics, however. Family loyalties are strong, yet individual members of the family seem to get along pretty much on their

own. Few planned activities take place within the family. When children leave to find work outside the region the chief communication is coming back weekends or holidays. If the distance is too great, often communication all but ceases. This is amazing, since the family tie seems to be so close.

In our middle-class society where opportunities present themselves on every side, we tend to gear our lives toward achievement. We want to do things with our lives, and so we have goals of all kinds toward which we strive.

In a society where goals have not been achievable, or not as achievable, life does not take on the attribute of this drive for realizing goals. It tends, instead, to take on the character of living with that which is possible. If goals are not possible—not travel, not wealth, not new housing, not job advancement—then that which is possible is relationship with people, with family and friends close by. Thus life in “closed door” cultures tends toward relational ends, not object goals. The task of living with the people around becomes more important than achieving goals.

You and I generally regard the agencies and institutions of government as a means for achieving economic progress. There are many forces, however, which attempt to preserve the status quo and perhaps even work toward making government less efficient than in the past (15). One such pressure is the feeling of relative deprivation on the part of the rural disadvantaged which in turn has led to a widespread alienation from society. Many people, for instance, feel that they simply cannot cope with the demands of a modern industrial order and, as a result, they shrink from any confrontation. Their dependence on the government for assistance often encourages the preservation of outdated political systems and machines. Low income, low educational level, and feelings of powerlessness to do anything to improve the system are common elements in situations where political misgivings exist.

Mistrust of local government officials has always existed, and in many cases with good reason. But usually the disadvantaged take it for granted this is the “normal” way things are done, hence, there is no use to try to change things. This fatalistic attitude exists not only in relation to the government but to other important matters such as health, hygiene, children’s education, success, and, of course, economic achievement. (The poor farmer

in Afghanistan's valleys considers his plight as God's will. What will be. . . .)

I should also touch briefly on religion as a factor with the rural poor. Most of them tend to be overwhelmingly Protestant. The dominant religious traditions emphasize congregational autonomy, which weakens ties with the outside and reinforces the localistic orientation. Furthermore, the general religious orientation strongly emphasizes direct personal relationships between the individual and his God to such an extent that great social pressure is put upon each individual to establish such a relationship (21). This stress, coupled with low educational levels has tended to make religion more emotional, more fundamentalistic, more personal, and more familial than the Great Society's religion.

It is no surprise, then, to find scores of "splinter" groups or sects, few highly formalized church organizations, and consequently very low numbers of church members reported in religious censuses. The family, in this society, fulfills more of the religious function than is true in the greater American society. Thus, by its very nature and structure, religion tends **not** to be an effective, close institutional link between the relatively isolated rural communities and the Great Society. And if you recall the brief discussion on attitudes toward local government, I think you can also conclude that communication between the Great Society and the rural communities through political institutions is probably not as influential in bringing about socio-cultural integration as one might suppose.

A study of low-income families in eastern South Dakota by Dr. James L. Satterless and Dr. Marvin R. Riley, sociologists at South Dakota State University, confirms some of the characteristics I have mentioned and disputes others. Their study was prompted by the report from the President's National Advisory Commission on rural poverty in 1967 which showed that there was more poverty in rural America proportionately than in our cities (17).

As you remember, in metropolitan areas, one person in eight is poor, in the suburbs the ratio is one to 15, but in the rural areas one in every four persons is poor. This Commission estimated that about 30 per cent of our total population lives in rural areas, yet 40 per cent of the nation's poor live there. Nearly 14 million rural Americans are in a state of poverty. Contrary to popular

impression, they are not found on farms, but the majority are in small towns and villages.

(Incidentally, the implications of the study for communications personnel have been compiled by John L. Pates, agricultural editor at South Dakota State University, and I'll briefly report these later.)

These are some of the findings from the study:

1. Real problem: underemployment not unemployment.
2. Nearly 45 per cent were 50 years of age and over.
3. Programs that require change of residence have limited appeal.
4. Most families have access to radio and TV sets.
5. High reluctance to be "exposed."
6. Factors such as lack of experience, motivation, and leadership will affect success of "participation" programs.
7. Church may be means of contacting some poverty families.
8. One-third of families experience serious illness.
9. Family size an important factor (6.5 members vs. national average of 3.6 persons).
10. Characteristics of low-income families vary considerably.
11. Poverty group highly heterogeneous.
12. Most families possess fewer than seven of the 14 "culture of poverty" characteristics.
13. About half of the group exhibited high alienation.
14. About one-third unfavorable toward education.

I want to repeat a point made earlier and that is please keep in mind that people in poverty are not a homogeneous group. They differ in aspirations and resources and require separate analysis and different approaches. Their past experiences vary widely and they live today in different settings. The South Dakota study makes this point and it is reiterated in the literature about Appalachia. Many in poverty have high enough aspirations. But because they lack basic education and skills and have lived a generation or more in a culture of poverty and limited environment, they simply are not able to rise above their situation. The more able migrate to places where opportunities for advancement seem a bit more favorable (5).

The primary difference between the South Dakota study and most others I have seen has to do with the "culture of poverty concept." In the South Dakota study only 24 per cent of the sample fit the stereotype.

However, as best as I can determine, the "culture of poverty" concept is fully recognized by social scientists as sound and helpful, provided it is thought of in the context of the total style of living and not as merely a list of myths and clichés about poor people.

In this connection I quote from a paper titled *Goals, Patterns, and Changes Among the Disadvantaged*, by Bruce M. John and M. E. John (7).

"The people living in rural neighborhoods and communities where for many years natural resources have been scarce tend to develop an integrated way of life in keeping to the setting. A consensus develops concerning their goals and aspirations. It is in such areas where a poverty culture has developed. The value systems of these people place very little emphasis upon education. Religion, as traditionally conceived, plays a very important part in their life. The Bible, interpreted literally, is used to justify their class position. They are God-fearing, feeling that the wicked will be punished. The impact of social control through group approval and disapproval is strong, and at times cruel.

"High aspirations for economic achievement is considered worldly and in conflict with religious values. While in these areas there are usually a few families with good incomes, these cannot be identified by visual means. They tend to have the same value systems and live like their neighbors. Social contacts tend to be on a primary group basis. Personal relationships become a strong social value. To better oneself would be to move out of the group and to place the group in a relatively lower status. Strong group sanctions are employed to prevent members from getting 'up-pish.' These sanctions also serve as a deterrent to leadership development. Their restricted and limited way of life, interpreted as a good life, and rigid social controls serve to stifle change.

"In the years ahead," the report says, "these communities will become less isolated. Their contacts with communities with a higher level of living will increase. As a result, more and more of the people, particularly the young men and women, will be less willing to accept the goals and aspirations contained in the culture as has been true in the past."

This break in isolation has come to pass. Listen to this passage by James S. Brown and Harry K. Schwarzweller, discussing "The Appalachian Family" (2):

"The monopoly over an individual's socialization and social

world that the family had, especially in the days when the mountain school systems were so inadequate, made it very difficult to reach the individual mountaineer and his children with these new ideas. Although these barriers to effective communication still exist, the situation is changing very dramatically. . . . Eastern Kentucky is now in a turmoil with all kinds of communication channels from the outside running into the area and so inundating the people with new ideas that they are almost 'going down for the third time.' Indeed it is amazing how many changes have come about and how many new ideas are being absorbed by the mountain people."

Now, briefly, let me talk about one institutional channel for change that exists within such communities—the mass media. Mass media would seem to provide a tremendously persuasive direct entree by the national culture into the insular family systems of these rural communities. Yet, by its very nature, this contact is specialized, impersonal, concerned more with things than with ideas, more with ends than means, and only indirectly with the normative structure of the insular family system. Mass media effect a partial or weak linkage, attaining communicative meaning only after being strained through the sieve of the value interests of the familial society.

Furthermore, some rural low-income families do not have as much contact with mass communication media as one might suppose. For example, a study of families participating in a program of Aid to Families With Dependent Children and Unemployed Parents in seven eastern Kentucky counties found that "over four-fifths of the families had no member who read a newspaper regularly, half of the families seldom or never saw television, and a third had no radio. Most of the few newspapers read were local county weeklies—the radio stations they reported listening to were almost exclusively local eastern Kentucky ones. While one might expect each family to be reached by at least one of the media, this was not the case, for a fifth had no newspaper, radio, TV, nor anyone in the family who regularly viewed TV (18)."

In contrast, the South Dakota study reports 96.7 per cent have radios, 88.3 per cent have television, one-third receive a daily newspaper. A higher number, however, 44.2 per cent, receive no newspaper.

In a West Virginia study (8), 85.7 per cent had radios, 87.5 per cent had television, 41 per cent received a daily newspaper, and

55.4 per cent received a weekly newspaper. These results are similar to the South Dakota study.

In any event, for the message to be received it must be in congruence with the value system of the local culture or with the specified interest of a given segment of the society. For instance, from the South Dakota study, John Pates suggests that the alienation factor "indicates that educational programs designed for the future would have to be sold on some other basis than that normally assumed. The concept of 'saving' money or time might not be the best tack to use from an editorial standpoint." Also, Mr. Pates points out that the high proportion of families with radio and television sets could be misleading because the possibility of programming for a low-income audience may be limited. (Someone has said that broadcasting is not a **mass** medium, but rather a **class** medium. The distinction is found in the values of the listeners as compared with the social-cultural values stations pump out.) He suggests that the potential for direct mail may be significant because of a dearth of reading material in most low-income homes.

I want to suggest one or two other roles for the mass media. The mass media are highly effective in producing an awareness of something that does not exist in the individual's cognitive sphere. Furthermore, subsequent information on that idea will maintain and even stimulate individual interest. We must recognize, however, that the process of dissemination into the local culture entails a two-step flow of communication.

The content of the mass media output is picked up first by local opinion leaders who are highly selective in the kinds of changes they would be willing to advocate. The innovation must "fit" the opinion leader's values as well as his perception of the local social, political, and economic situation. In other words, the opinion leader is somewhat of a control factor on the impact of the media upon the local culture.

The mass media can create an awareness of the truth and part of the truth emerges when one compares his own situation with that of situations elsewhere. I also suggest that the mass media can be effective in building a sense of community—united perhaps by common problems, in this case by poverty. Without communication there can be no cohesiveness and without cohesiveness there can be no unified approach to common problems.

Accelerated changes are taking place in our rural areas. As the

influence of mass society increases, the influence of local communities, neighborhoods, families, and other local reference groups will decline. Better means of communication have made rural residents more aware of the urban middle-class style of life. Interaction and communication with the outside are the two main forces which can lead to the creation of new social systems and to the de-emphasis of old ones.

You and I, through our university structure and its many institutional linkages, have a vital role to play in this transformation.

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