Reverse Migration and the Rural Community Development Problem

Donald M. Sorensen

The thesis of the paper is that the more pro-found impacts of the recent population turnaround center on the qualitative aspects of community in rural America. That is, the nature of community life will be determined by the relationships that evolve through newcomer and oldtimer interaction in providing needed goods and services. Inherent in the movement of people to the countryside is the potential for a wide range of human interaction relationships. As newcomers arrive in the rural community, they may choose isolation from others except for the social contact necessary to meet their personal needs for exchange of goods and services. Alternatively, newcomers may find oldtimers isolated from each other, as farmers have little contact with general townspeople who, in turn, have little contact with the professional group in the community. Should newcomer and oldtimer interaction become more intense, the potential exists for creation of a hostile encounter in which conflict, self-interest and competitive use of power dominate. Alternatively, the potential exists for a mutually enhancing experience in which people share meanings, thereby developing trust and com-mitment to the community as the basis for action in meeting individual and collective needs. Currently, we can only speculate on the range of relationships

likely to emerge as people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds and experiences find them-selves together in limited geographical space. The challenge to the social scientist and the community development practitioner is to seek understanding of the phenomena and to facilitate the processes whereby community integration occurs at the level desired by community people.

The paper begins with a brief summary of the population turnaround trend. Next is a statement of the fundamental community development prob-lem, as I see it, and an explanation for the loss of community level control. The last part of the paper examines possible relationships likely to emerge from the arrival of newcomers and suggests ways whereby a sense of community can be built incorporating both the indigenous population and the newcomers. The conclusions contain implica-tions for the researcher and extension professional for initiating functional leadership in community development work.

The Return to the Country

From before the turn of the century until the 1970 census of population, demographers docu-mented the continuing migration of U.S. citizens from the countryside to our urbanizing centers. Although arrested temporarily during the Great Depression of the 1930's, the rural to urban move-ment gained momentum in the 1940's as social, economic, and technological change accelerated. These changes were led by the mechanization of basic rural industries, mobilization for national defense, and growing concentration of manufac-turing and related service industries. These forces interacted dynamically to fill the path to the city with people seeking a better life than that afforded them in a decaying rural economy. So pervasive

had become the trend that Presidents Johnson and Nixon established blue ribbon task forces and commissions to study the phenomena of rural decline and to propose policy alternatives for revitalizing rural America. Little more than political lip service to rural America's needs accompanied their reports and similar official proclamations, memoranda, and legislative proposals.

Despite the absence of effective public policy for encouraging resettlement of rural areas, we appear to be experiencing a dramatic reversal of the rural to urban population flow. This reversal documented for the 1970-73 period is the result of innumerable personal decisions, both private and commercial in nature [Beale, 1975].

Demographers and other social scientists are suggesting a number of explanations for the decision of individuals to relocate in rural communities. Among more generally offered explanations are: 1) the development of rural recreational and retirement communities, 2) the exploitation of energy resources, 3) the growth of state and community colleges, 4) the decentralization of manufacturing activity, and 5) the search for alternative life-styles resulting from an apparent shift in values and in attitudes regarding the place where people want to live. Although these generalities appear to afford some plausible gross explanations, we still lack understanding of the decision-making process and factors entering into that process which lead people to choose to live in rural America. Regardless of the reason, newcomers and oldtimers are confronting the need to adapt to each other and to a changing rural community situation. This means that new relationships must be worked out in how community needs and priorities are determined and in how action is taken to meet them.

The Community Development Problem

All too many public policy makers, community development practitioners, and social scientists tend to view the community development problem associated with the population turnaround in terms of immediate impact on demand for public services. The problem, therefore, is defined as demand for street, sewer, and water systems; for health, education, and welfare programs; and for fiscal resources to pay the bill. Although

these are important concerns, formulation of the problem in this manner is inadequate. It is inadequate since it is based on the assumption that the problem already has been defined—thus, the fundamental community development problem is overlooked.

What, then, is the fundamental community development problem? I prefer to conceptualize the problem as the need for developing a sense of community which enables people to determine individual and collective need priorities and to take democratic social action in addressing their needs. Communication or shared meanings in face to face interaction is the foundation upon which community is built. When people are sharing meanings, they are experiencing development of their shared values, which leads to trust and commitment. When these qualities of community exist, people in face to face interaction are more able to articulate "real" community needs and structure action to respond effectively. Thus, I see the current limited effectiveness of people in communicating or sharing meanings as contributing to uncertainty regarding what it is the community feels it needs and to the inability to take action to meet its basic needs for goods and services. So long as this communicative inadequacy persists, community problems and action will be associated only with special interest and politically powerful groups, often to the detriment of other interests or members of the community. The current unrest and conflict in communities where competitive forces have displaced cooperative forces as the predominant basis for social action reflects an evolving imbalance in these forces that direct human behavior. Development is thus a product of conflict between opposing forces. Those forces most able to garner support from vertical structures outside the community will win. The losers are alienated. The streets may be improved, but sense of community is lost.

Being unable to take action in meeting their needs means that people do not have the opportunity to realize their human purposes and meanings; they are not part of the community. Developing community means that communication or shared meanings must be established as a basis for exercising democratic social action. Organizational or structural response growing out of shared meanings meets people's needs in the fullest sense. That

is, people develop their own self-awareness and realize their human potential when they are effectively sharing meanings as a basis for taking individual and social action. Development of community is something that may or may not be spontaneous, but it can be nurtured through selfconscious leadership. Hopefully, the social scientist and community development practitioner will develop the consciousness to initiate this kind of functional and integrative leadership.

The need to (re)establish communication is particularly acute in rural communities experiencing rapid population growth. Newcomers pose a threat to the traditional social structure supported by the indigenous population of the receiving community. The indigenous population often has a fairly strong sense of community identify and has, over the years, developed social structure to support it. Newcomers and old-timers alike will be affected by the need for a new structure based on a newly emerging relationship. If newcomers are unable or unwilling to relate effectively to oldtimers, they will find themselves participants in creating a social environment similar to that which many of them moved to escape. Therefore, the basis for having made the move is eroded as feelings of suspicion, distrust, misunderstanding, and non-acceptance pervade the social environment. If the indigenous population is unable or unwilling to relate effectively with the newcomers, they will force their new neighbors to seek support for their needs outside the community, thus eroding community viability — the ability of a community to define and solve its own problems. Such failure will result in major restructuring of the social system with most major decisions made outside the local community.

While it is acknowledged that some migrants may be seeking non-involvement through their move to the country, simply being there creates some need for human interaction with others of the community. Some basic level of shared meanings must exist in order to determine individual and collective action. Individual or collective needs cannot be worked out in a social vacuum—there must be human interaction. It is not a matter of quantity, but the quality, of the social interaction that is important.

The Erosion of Community Level Control

Accompanying the breakdown of communication or shared meanings in American community life has been the growth of centralizing tendencies in both the private and public spheres. Through time, decision-making has been evolving to higher and higher levels of concentration with control being put in the hands of a few powerful people. Concurrently, there has been a reduction of influence in decision-making at the local community level. A brief historical review may provide some perspective on the process through which individual and local community organizations have been losing control over the organizational mechanisms which are designed to provide them needed goods and services.

First, it would be extremely naive to assume that individuals and community organizations ever exercised complete autonomy in decision-making or that they ever experienced immunity from external economic, social, and cultural influence. Further, it would be unrealistic to believe these outside influences will cease to impact significantly upon the decisions and actions taken by people in local community settings. It is not unrealistic, however, to believe that local people could gain greater control over their life circumstances if they were provided help.

In the early days of the Republic, when sophisticated transportation and communications systems were non-existent, there was considerably more self-sufficiency exercised in conducting individual and community economic and political affairs than exists today. Economic, social, and political organizations were small in scale with control primarily community based. Thus, decision-making tended to be at the local level. Local business enterprises grew out of recognized local business opportunities. Local public service organizations emerged in response to locally determined needs for collective goods and services. Max Weber set forth his concept on this phenomenon in his *Theory of Social and Economic Organization,* Weber observed that organizational and institutional order develops out of common agreement upon desired ends and the means for realizing those ends. In other words, the structure grows out of needs that are agreed upon by the residents of the community (or the state, nation, or private industry).

Through time, however, dynamic forces of change have interacted to shift the locus of control of both private and public affairs to higher levels of concentration. This means that decision-making and planning prerogatives are exercised by elite groups at state, regional, and national levels. As these decisions from the top are carried into action, the community has little autonomy except to make some local adaptations. Thus, local people and organizations have been losing their ability to influence decisions and public policy impacting upon the community.

Roland Warren's central thesis in his book, *The Community in America,* is that American communities are undergoing a dramatic transformation of their entire structure and function: "... this 'great change' in community living includes the increasing orientation of local community units toward extra-community systems of which they are a part, with a decline in community cohesion and autonomy" [Warren, p. 53]. Warren's analysis of important dimensions of community life can be best summarized in his own words:

> In the first place, they signalize the increasing and strengthening of the external ties which bind the local community to the larger society. In the process, various parts of the community—its educational system, its recreation, its economic units, its governmental functions, its religious units, its health and welfare agencies, and its voluntary associations—have become increasingly oriented toward district, state, regional, or national offices and less and less oriented toward each other.
> In the second place, as local community units have become more closely tied in with state and national systems, much of the decision-making prerogative concerning the structure and function of these units has been transferred to the headquarters or district offices of the systems themselves, thus, leaving a narrower and narrower scope of functions over which local units, responsible to the local community, exercise autonomous power. [Warren, p.5].

Warren's concept of increasing vertical integration means that complex bureaucratic structures exercise increasingly greater control over lives of people and their organizations at the local level. These bureaucratic organizations have a number of distinguishing characteristics, including specialization of roles and tasks; the prevalence of autonomous, rational, and non-personal organizational rules; and the general orientation to rational, efficient implementation of specific goals to meet needs of the organization. Thus, bureaucracy, private or public, is means oriented and cannot address itself to determine what human and com-

munity ends are going to be. Herein lies the problem associated with centralization of control. Outside bureaucracies with local functionaries are now exercising the functional action prerogatives, formerly the prerogative of local community residents. This structural phenomenon is legitimated by a dominant framework of meaning focused on rationality, efficiency, and utilitarian ends. This framework of meaning is internal to the evolving organizational structure and does not grow out of a shared relationship with organizational clientele. Consequently, community people, unable to explore and express a sense of shared meaning with each other and with local bureaucratic representatives, become alienated from the organizations designed to provide for their needs. Hence, if community people fail to share meanings and to remain in touch with formal organizations impacting upon their life circumstances, they cannot develop a sense of freedom in their life experiences or have the autonomy to act.

It is only through the sharing of feelings and taking of action to provide for their own needs that people realize their human purposes and meanings. It is in the taking of action that people develop a sense of consciousness that gives meaning to their life experiences. The kinds of needs provided in community, which represents the level of need above family, are integral to individual consciousness and development of a sense of meaning. Thus, to maintain and further community integrity means that each new generation must provide for its own needs and, through collective action, realize its own human purposes and meanings. If action is controlled from the outside, which means that ends or meanings are imposed, then individuals lose their autonomy, as the structures no longer adequately serve community needs. I am saying that the individual must control his circumstances in order to structure his action, thus realizing his own purposes and meanings. In the societal concept, this notion is consistent with concepts of democracy and freedom. Given that vertical structure grows out of community, it is not inevitable that the structure would have to take over in the sense that internal criteria dictate its action. Rather, the vertical structure, by staying somewhat open, could serve local people by helping them work out problems and find solutions in ways which allow the community to maintain its own integrity. The basic question is whether structures exist to meet com-

munity needs or whether communities exist to support structures.

In sum, the loss of sense of community and the growing centralization of decision-making compounds the problems associated with newcomers and oldtimers adapting to each other in rural community settings.

The Arrival of Newcomers

The arrival of newcomers in rural communities affords the possibility of furthering the disintegrative forces or strengthening the integrative forces in American community life. The outcome depends upon the nature of the relationship that evolves between newcomers and oldtimers and the degree to which each is committed to purely limited self-interest objectives. For example, some oldtimers represented by the Chamber of Commerce perspective may be linked up with outside organizations working to further economic development of the local community, while a group of newcomers (wanting to be the last immigrants to the area) may be working with various outside environmental lobby groups to limit community growth. Thus, pursuit of self-interest, reinforced by bureaucratic organizations with power to affect community action, may lead to a circling of the wagons around the respective narrow self-interest camps. In this environment, conflict, distrust, and further fragmentation occurs. This means that power becomes the dominant basis for action, usually without concern for others in the community who may be adversely affected by action taken by the powerful group. In fact, each group may be firmly convinced that its actions are in the best interests of everyone.

On the other hand, the arrival of newcomers could provide the catalytic element for the revitalization of a sense of community in rural America. If newcomers approach the community with a sense of openness, and oldtimers demonstrate reciprocal feelings, there exists an opportunity for mutually exploring their feelings as a basis for identifying community needs and structuring a course of action for addressing these needs. If both are open to sharing meanings, trust and commitment will become a bond that means the discovery of the "gemeinshaft" or the glue that holds community together.

Where there is "gemeinshaft," there is caring and where there is caring, there is mutual respect for individual human dignity and where there is individual human dignity, there is belonging and freedom of choice. Horizontal integration of community can provide direction for action, and the community can then utilize resources of the vertical structure to further ends identified through mutual exploration and exercise of choice. Rather than serving only limited self-interests, resources of bureaucracies could be utilized for integrative purposes. Two notions predict such outcomes. First, local people are responsibly and meaningfully involved in the provision of their needed goods and services, hence giving their lives a sense of purpose. Second, all bureaucracies strive for at least the appearance of service to the community. When the community can demonstrate that it knows what services it needs, the bureaucracy is hard pressed to provide it.

Obviously, this latter outcome is not automatic, due to the prevalence of the previously described loss of community and centralization of control in contemporary society. The latter outcome requires imaginative leadership—that kind the university potentially could initiate if it would commit itself to developing an understanding of community development processes and to cultivating the notion that people have creative potential for improving their life circumstances if functional leadership is available. Thus, the university and its professional staff must reexamine their criteria for action and must determine which outcome they wish to foster. If they wish to serve the community, they must be more open to the needs of community people in determining community action as opposed to only looking toward internal organizational prerogatives for determining what to do.

The Building of Community

As stated above, communication or shared meanings provide a sense of community characterized by caring, trust, and commitment. Thus, the building of community in America implies that individuals are experiencing the renewal and growth of two vital societal resources: a sense of value and individual identity. Since it is within the

horizontal patterns of community—in informal face to face interaction—that meanings and purposes are explored, it is here, within an atmosphere emphasizing common experience, sentiment, and self, that a sense of purpose is created and experienced. Thus, growth of community means enhancement of the sense of purpose and identity for individuals within social systems. Secondly, it is within certain kinds of communities that stable, integrated, and emotionally healthy personalities are nurtured. If this is so, then the development of community means the enhancement of feeling, loving, caring, and moral personal character. Thus, community development essentially becomes a means—human development becomes the end.

What, then, becomes the action research perspective for the social scientist or the community development practitioner concerned with fostering individual and community development? This question is particularly important, since our disciplinary orientation reflects the general societal trend toward specialization. Throughout our professional training and subsequent careers, we have assumed that our disciplines identified adequately the ends in terms of material well-being. We have assumed that such ends would lead to greater satisfaction or utility. Since we assumed the ends were given, we have specialized in searching for practical solutions to pressing specific problems identified within our disciplines. Consequently, our solutions have been of a technical nature oriented to material and occasionally to social problems. Specialized research and action programs of acedemic professionals often are based on knowledge needed by special interest groups and bureaucratic agencies; hence, our efforts have reinforced the structured, formal or vertical dimensions of society toward the greater centralization of control. Continuing pressures to find technical solutions to practical problems may have caused us to allow the means to become the ends. That is, the means have become objectified as ends in themselves. Thus, we may have lost sight of the broader societal problem and failed to maintain a sense of responsibility for becoming actively involved in the determination of what the ends are going to be. This neglect is particularly critical at the present time as we find society in a struggle to develop meaning and purpose as traditional values are undergoing fundamental reexamination. We as social scientists and com-

munity development practitioners must come to know and acknowledge that human values are not something determined outside our sphere of concern; rather, they are a problematic ingredient in determining our own action.

If we become involved in determining what the ends are going to be, that is, if we participate fully with those we say we are serving, in the sharing of meanings as a basis for determining our action, then we will have to approach the community from a stance other than our traditional *a priori* definition of their problem. It means we transcend our normally defined professional role and mutually enter into a sharing relationship with people we are paid to serve. This likely means a tenuous or uncertain beginning for use. However, by being willing to explore our feelings, and to test our skills, knowledge, and commitment in this initial atmosphere of uncertainty, we will experience emotional and intellectual growth. In this setting, a professional beginning from the more horizontal perspective is able to demonstrate needed functional leadership in the search for shared meanings and an ensuing course of action. Rather than approaching the community from our elite position in the vertical structure, we, the professionals, must enter the community more on the basis of an equal to undertake a common endeavor. In doing so, we become a true employee of the people. Therefore, by committing ourselves to the community development process, we become willing to let the problems of the field determine our participation. We will identify, define, and work on problems the peoples of communities own, rather than on problems owned by other members of our discipline or professional society. We will not attempt to force people's meanings and problems into our cognitive framework. Rather, from our more horizontal perspective, we will gain new insights and jointly develop new understandings and formulations of community needs toward which we can address our knowledge. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to be able to communicate with the client within his own perspective and at the level of his concern rather than our own. Within this relationship, the professional can help bring forth important questions and introduce alternatives for consideration. The professional can demonstrate the functional leadership necessary to bring about

increased horizontal integration at the community level. Through his broader perspective of outside resources, he can help to foster vertical integration by helping organize these inputs so that they can be assimilated into the community.

In conclusion, our involvement in community can be a creative process with mutual development taking place. We are forced to put together our intellectual values in a community setting, as to fail to do so means we are unable to effectively communicate with people. The process is developmental of community people as they begin to share with each other and with the professional perspectives beyond their own previous experience. By being able to experience shared meanings, the newcomer, the oldtimer, and the professional will be contributing to the building of qualitative community in rural America.

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