Rural Families Changing But Retain Distinctiveness

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Perhaps the biggest evolution in rural America in the past two decades is greater diversity—in land use, in community structure, in employment and educational opportunities, in political activism, and, as a consequence, in family life.

Discussions of the family in rural society are often plagued by problems of definition. Assuming agreement can be achieved on what constitutes a family, the definition of rural is open to wide debate. Indeed, the numerous terms referring to rurality—nonmetropolitan, small towns, and villages, sparsely populated areas and open country, to name a few—reflect the lack of a clear consensus on what constitutes rural.

No one argues the existence of rural areas or that families live there. What is open to dispute, however, is the precise boundaries and parameters of both of these concepts.

In much academic writing, "family" refers to a husband, wife and children. Among the general public, however, family often is extended to include the kin of both the husband and the wife—their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins. This more encompassing view reflects the interwoven nature of family relationships and reminds us that such systems are intimately interconnected. Thus, the effects of changes in one part of the family system have the potential to affect the entire system.

Similarly, the term rural has many meanings and different uses. Too often it is narrowly equated with living and working on farms. In reality, the rural America of the 80's is characterized by a wide range of life styles, family structures, patterns of residence and occupations. The common denominator is scale—lower concentrations of poplation and greater physical dispersity.

Several recent events have created a greater interest about, and attention to, the family in rural society. The significant shifts in population toward rural areas, the continued decline of the intercities, and the greater location of industries in rural areas have combined with other factors to focus attention on the families who live in rural communities or who are moving to such areas.

Although certain aspects of current rural family life are poorly researched and understood, a sketchy picture of such families is emerging. Primary attention has been focused on the concept of change—changes that have and haven't happened and changes that are predicted.

Two cautions need to be recognized about any discussion of changes over time. First, there is a tendency to remember things as being better than they actually were. Currently, America is experiencing a revival and nostalgia about life at the turn of the century. Yet, when individuals who lived through this period are consulted, an enormous discrepancy exists between their description of everyday life and the popular images of the way it was. Our perceptions of rural family life, both past and present, are skewed by this tendency to selectively recall events. Libertoff has proposed that there is:

"a mythology engrained in our historical and literary culture which has portrayed, even to this day, country living and family life as unspoiled, pure and wholesome, free from pressures and tensions while set within idyllic gardens and fields. Completing this romantic version of rural life is frequently the inclusion of the extended family concept as represented by both Grandma and Grandpa who are usually seen as contented sentimentalists, somewhat dull, carefree and most usually perched on a gently moving swing as they watch their grandchildren frolic and play."

In reality, rural life is seldom like the above description and many believe that it seldom was.

The second tendency, perhaps only the reverse side of the coin, is to view all changes as negative. Certainly some changes can be documented that have had negative effects on rural family life; yet, other changes have made positive contributions. Personal interpretations of changes are a function of a complex combination of values, beliefs, and individual circumstances.

How Rural Family Is Changing

Much of the debate about changes in families living in small towns and rural communities has centered on the question of whether rural families are becoming more like urban families. Those who argue that they are point to rural statistics that indicate increased rates of divorce, decreased fertility rates, and larger numbers of rural women working outside the home. Because these trends also have been observed in urban families, proponents argue that the two environments are becoming more alike.

In contrast, others propose that the rural/urban distinction continues to be useful and that rural families are indeed significantly different from their urban counterparts. Both views are correct. Many of the changes that have been witnessed in urban families have their parallels in families who reside in small towns and rural communities. Such changes as divorce, working mothers, smaller households, and lower fertility don't just happen in the "big city" but really are increasing "down on the farm."

Despite the similar trends, it is equally true that rural families continue to be significantly different from urban families. An analysis of census data found that "rural people marry earlier than their urban counterparts, have more children, and live in larger households. Labor force participation continues to be lower among rural women, and a smaller proportion of rural marriages end in divorce." It's as if the two are riding parallel but different roads—going in the same direction but remaining on distinctly separate paths.

In addition to changes in family size and composition, data reflect changes in how rural family members function and interact with each other. Although this area still requires much study, evidence suggests we may be in a major period of transition. The roles, responsibilities, and expectations for all major family members—husband, wife, and children—may be experiencing a significant reformulation.

For example, consider the enormous rise in part-time farming in the past decade. In 1969, more than half of all farm operators were employed off the farm; 40 per-

cent worked more than 100 days per year off the farm. In 1944, only 16 percent were employed off their own farm. An investigation completed in Wisconsin indicated that off-farm employment was becoming more prevalent in both large and small farm operations. More than half of the farmers making less than $10,000 gross income from their operations were employed off the farm. The U.S. Census of Agriculture reported that off-farm work is more likely to be the pattern of younger rather than older farmers.

Other changes in rural communities have contributed to a shift in the traditional male pattern of the self-employed, independent family farmer. Consider, for example, these circumstances:

- the decrease in the number of farms in the United States (from 6.8 million in 1935 to 2.3 million in 1974) and the simultaneous growth of corporate agribusiness;
- the significant increase in industrial manufacturers located in small towns and rural communities, and
- the significant inmigration of individuals from more urban settings.

If there ever were homogeneity among male roles and responsibilities in rural families, it is difficult to imagine that it exists today. The wider range of employment opportunities that now exist in rural America are a small, but significant, indicator of the diversity of life styles that permeate the countryside. The family farmer is not the stereotypic male role model for rural America; indeed, he may not even illustrate the predominant role.

As male roles have changed so have female roles. Indeed, some would argue that female roles have changed more dramatically than those of males. Bescher-Donnelly and Smith suggest that:

"changes in time allocation, combined with economic considerations, greater political awareness, and a need for self-fulfillment, have served to push or pull rural women into a variety of economic, political and educational roles outside of the family."

As the full-time family farmer stereotype is now inappropriate for the majority of rural males, so too is the sterotypic "farm image" of rural women outdated. Of the almost 26 million women aged 16 years and over who lived in rural areas in 1977, only nine percent lived on farms. They propose that the "farm image" characterizes the rural woman as one who:

"occupies her time with traditional homemaker and material responsibilities and expected farm chores—tending vegetable gardens, caring for poultry, canning and preserving food stuffs, and occasionally helping with the planting and harvesting. While this image was probably true for many rural women prior to 1900 and may still be accurate for some farm women today, it does not accurately describe the contemporary rural women."

In the late 1970's, small towns and rural communities offered males, females, and families a wider range of alternatives and options for employment, education, political involvement, and life styles. These opportunities have added to the diversity of rural America. Our traditional

images of the way rural families function internally have been challenged and need to be reexamined to bring them into closer consonance with reality.

The last members of the family—children—also have experienced some changes in their environment. Fertility rates are declining and rural children today are growing up with fewer siblings. The rise in divorce means more rural children are reared in single parent homes or reconstituted families.

In addition, the environmental and social/psychological diversity in rural areas has created an increasingly pluralistic society for today's rural youth. W. P. Kuvelsky in a paper on rural teenagers has noted:

"Alternative life styles, differing dramatically, do exist and offer potential alternatives for living most of us never dreamed of. As a result of these alternatives, rural youth have greater opportunities to realize their ultimate life goals and more opportunities to make a mistake that will hinder their progress toward these ends."

Rural Environment Changing

Perhaps the physical and social/psychological changes have been most compelling in the rural environment. Technological advances—electricity, the telephone, and air travel—have transformed both rural and urban America. However, other factors have uniquely contributed to creating a new rural landscape. Perhaps the most dramatic of these factors is the recent migration turnabout. In the year immediately after World War II, America experienced a dramatic exodus of young men, women, and their families from small towns and rural communities into more urbanized areas. The lure of better jobs, better wages, and more opportunities led millions to flee the countryside for the glitter and glamour of the big city. America embraced metropollyana, the delusion that sooner or later everyone will move to the city and live happily ever after.

Beginning with the 1970's, however, America began to experience a small but significant shift away from the rural-to-urban exodus. Indeed, during the 3-year period after 1970, population grew at a faster rate in rural counties than in metropolitan areas. This reversal was so pervasive that it held true for all age levels except young adults (ages 20-24 years) who continued to leave the rural environments in favor of more urban areas. But, apparently in the eyes of many Americans, the appeal of major urban areas had diminished and the attractiveness of rural small towns and communities had increased.

The influx of outsiders, flatlanders, city folks, and easterners has transformed rural America into a pluralistic mosaic of our entire country. Church services in northeast Vermont now routinely attract several generations of Vermonters, alongside newly arrived retired New Yorkers, next to young professional crafts persons seeking the freedom and clean air to practice their art. A changing rural society is affecting the family; and the changing family is affecting rural society.

The economic turndowns of the 70's have transfigured much of our society—and rural communities have

been no exception. The energy and inflation crises of the past decade have ravaged rural America with constantly escalating prices. Because of the greater openness of rural areas, rising costs have become an oppressive and often overwhelming obstacle. Dollar-a-gallon gasoline has made all but the simplest chore an expensive exercise. Rising heating oil prices, increasing fuel prices for machinery, and the constant press of distance for shopping, schools, and employment have each contributed to a stressful transition.

The recent political activism of farmers and other agricultural workers reflects a growing discontent in rural America with the manner in which rural affairs are handled. Indeed, certain elected officials (among them Senators and Governors) have become openly vocal about the perceived urban bias of Federal legislation and have become more visible in their efforts to raise the general consciousness throughout the country about rural problems. Where once rural issues, primarily agricultural, received ample attention, other issues now receive priority. Rural issues, more often than not, slip through the cracks.

What Are Future Needs?

Just as it is dangerous to generalize about groups of people, it is risky also to predict their future needs. Nevertheless, a crystal ball is not necessary to identify several present major needs that must be addressed in the near future to avoid an erosion in the quality of rural family life.

Perhaps the primary need is simply a better knowledge and understanding of the diversity of rural American family life. Despite many important and productive investigations of rural families, major areas remain poorly understood. With the significant shift in migration toward rural areas, there is a greater urgency and relevancy for a better understanding of such areas.

Certain subpopulations of rural America suffer even greater obscurity. Unfortunately, many of the latter are the most vulnerable: the rural elderly, the rural migrant minority, the poor, and the handicapped. If investigations to better understand these populations can be completed, if data banks can be constructed, and if our understandings can be solidified, then we can proceed in a more systematic fashion to address the needs of rural families.

Simultaneously, however, we must immediately begin to provide a greater number and range of services supportive to the growth and development of healthy rural family life. Research indicates that the greatest growth in social services has occurred in rural areas. Yet, this same research shows these considerable increases have failed to erase the rural-urban differences in the numbers and kinds of services offered. We now have sufficient data to realize that rural areas are experiencing such social problems as child and spouse abuse, teenage pregnancies, marital conflict, alcohol and drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, and crime.

To survive these and other less dramatic crises, rural families need to have available to them a range of services that support, rather than supplant, the quality of family life.

The final need, and perhaps the one that will facilitate the achievement of the two above, is the development of a Federal policy for both rural America and for the American family.

The need for a Federal policy framework for rural America has been recognized by current and previous administrations. Unfortunately, in the absence of a definitive Federal policy, past legislative actions often have appeared capricious, random, and scattered. A systematic approach to the numerous issues confronting rural America will require the development and adoption of a comprehensive policy framework.

Similarly, no comprehensive policy exists regarding American families. Despite such celebrations as the "International Year of the Child" and the "White House Conference on Families," the reality is that too little debate or dialogue continues on these subjects at the highest echelons of Federal, State, and local governments.

The rural family is caught at the junction of these two voids—and thus rests in a particularly vulnerable position. Despite this pessimistic tone, the 1970's have been a revitalizing time for rural America and its families. Problems exist and we should not, must not, ignore them. Simultaneously, rural families have many strengths and we must work hard to preserve and promote them.

Suggested Reading

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