

RURAL SOCIOLOGY AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

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In this paper I address the need for the RSS to foster more research activity related to the problems and needs of ethnic and racial minorities living in rural America. After providing a bit of history on this subject and briefly overviewing the present scene, I describe an attempt being made by a small group of RSS members to organize a Rural Ethnic Minorities Interest Group. Finally, I related some promising opportunities open to such a group and invite interested RSS members to join us to realize these opportunities.

Introduction

This past summer, before the RSS meetings in Athens, Georgia, I decided to explore the extent to which the RSS still reflected an involvement in researching the problems and needs of rural ethnic minority groups. My investigation led me to believe that a statement to call attention to the current situation in regard to this problem area within our subdiscipline was needed. Consequently I developed a short position paper to distribute among those attending the 1988 Annual Meetings (Kuvlesky, 1988).

When I returned from the meetings, I read a piece by Willits and Ghelfi in *TRS* (1988). The article contained a statement that reflected a judgment I had reached in my paper. Having reported that only 6 percent of active members in the RSS indicate they are from racial minorities and only 2 percent considered themselves Hispanics, they raise the following questions: "Is not the extremely small number of Blacks and Hispanics in the society an important signal? Is the RSS failing to attract and hold practicing rural sociologists from minority groups?" My answer to both questions is yes. And, also, the RSS is not holding on to many non-minority

members whose primary research interests involved racial and ethnic groups and intergroup relations.¹ Their evidence, along with encouragement from colleagues, motivated me to revise my "position paper" and submit it to *TRS*.

The purpose of this article is to provide a mechanism to *recreate a network* of rural sociologists having a *strong interest in rural ethnic minorities* and their problems. Through the late sixties and early seventies such a network evolved and played a key role in focusing public attention on these groups, certainly among the most disadvantaged in our society. With the pervasive social regression of the eighties and the decrease in support for researching the rural disadvantaged, this tightly focused network fell apart. My intention is to recreate it.

Some History

My colleague and friend, Clark Knowlton, and I became acquainted during the late sixties as a result of our annual contacts at the Rural Sociological Society meetings. Our strong supportive relationship evolved out of our mutual interests in trying to generate research activity among rural sociologists regarding problems of the rural poor and especially rural minorities. We, along with several other like-minded colleagues, achieved some degree of success in this regard. Through the seventies, an increasing interest in rural ethnic minorities was evidenced in session titles at the annual meetings and by periodic publication of relevant articles in *Rural Sociology* and Experiment Station publications. This line of research activity culminated in a collaborative research synthesis about rural ethnic minorities published in the early eighties as a chapter in a book edited by Dillman and Hobbs (1982), which was titled, "Minorities."² A number of rural sociologists contributed to the literature we cited, especially rural sociologists participating in a series of USDA-CSRS Southern Regional Projects during the sixties and seventies.

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We talked about following this chapter up with a book that would be more inclusive and thorough. Clark and I discussed this aspiration whenever we met or conversed on the phone. The job was never done. Looking back, I think we had reached the end of an era. Ronald Reagan had started his long reign and, coincidentally, research on the disadvantaged and ethnic minorities waned. In Rural Sociology the already prominent, building thrusts in agricultural sociology and the sociology of natural resources were capturing increasing interest and were clearly evolving into primary areas of effort. A look at the contents of the 1988 meeting program will reveal these as dominant interest areas.

The Present Scene

In my judgement the amount of attention given to problems of rural ethnic minorities by rural sociologists has not been any lower since the sixties than it is now. And yet, the circumstances of rural ethnic minorities, the vast bulk of the rural poor in several regions, and maybe in total, is worsening as the pervasive social regression of the 1980's impacted most of those who had the least. Few would contend that rural areas in general are suffering in this regard now. Most people tend to assume that ethnic minorities have improved their economic, social, and material aspects of life as a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and early 1970's. On the other hand, evidence is beginning to accumulate that brings this assertion into question. During the eighties it appears a regression may have developed along some dimensions of the life circumstances and chances of ethnic minorities. I have seen a number of news articles and some research pieces reporting that fewer Blacks are going on to higher education, that Blacks and Hispanics are less able to afford decent housing, and that many members of ethnic minorities have lost access to medical and health services and to supplementary food programs.

One of the first things we need to do is to gather and order research evidence to test the general validity of these reported negative trends. Whether those trends can be documented or not,

has the general gap between urban and rural populations widened, narrowed or remained as it was prior to 1980? It seems to me that rural people would suffer more from a general regression in treatment of ethnic minorities as compared with their metro counterparts. At any rate, that is another research question that needs to be addressed. As rural sociologists, we have generally ignored the problems of racial and ethnic patterns of prejudice and discrimination (personal and structural). Are we still unwilling to address these problems head on? Look at our program for the 1988 RSS meetings and make your own judgement! As a very active participant in rural sociology in the south during the sixties and early seventies, I'd say the quantity of activity, at least in Experiment Station funded research, has decreased a great deal. We are back to where we were in the early sixties, covering our research on minorities under the label of 'poverty research.' And much, if not most, of this research is based on demographic analysis using Census data. Do we not need a broader range of variables to address the complex structural problems faced by ethnic minorities in rural America today?

Forming a RSS Interest Group

There is much work that needs to be done if we are going to relate to discovering the needs of rural ethnic minorities and contribute to policy formation and development of action programs to meet these needs. My investigation of what we have been doing as reflected by papers presented at the 1988 annual meetings, is not encouraging.³ On the program for these meetings only one session of any kind, out of about eighty-five, included the explicit mention of "race," "ethnic group," or made reference to a particular U.S. ethnic group. What is more, only four paper or panel presentation titles, out of well over a hundred, included any reference of the kinds noted above.

My hopes to locate rural sociologists having a prime interest in researching rural ethnic minorities has been accomplished to some extent. We have over 20 people indicating a strong interest in establishing a network and a formal

interest or research group within the RSS.⁴ I feel sure there are more colleagues who will join this collaborative effort once they find out about it. Over 40 RSS members are listed as having "competency" in the area of "race and ethnic relations" in the 1987-1988 *RSS Membership Directory*. Few of them appear on the Rural Ethnic Minorities Interest Group listing I have developed.

Another initial objective was to get more visibility for our area of study on the 1989 meetings program. With the generous assistance of Wava Haney, we have two paper sessions and a panel scheduled. We will also have a business meeting scheduled to formally organize as a part of the RSS. These accomplishments should put us in a good position to play a key role developing the program for the 1990 meetings in Norfolk, for which the theme will be "Rural Minorities." Gene Summers has already taken advantage of our network in seeking assistance to help with some initiatives he is developing relative to the RSS.

All in all, I think we have done very well over the past nine months in organizing a network of researchers that have a strong interest in rural ethnic minorities. We are still interested in locating other like-minded colleagues to join with us in developing plans for the future, especially in reference to the 1990 annual meetings. Also, we are looking forward to developing some research syntheses in a special monograph or book. Rex Campbell, Editor of *TRS*, has already asked us to think about organ-

izing a special issue focusing on rural ethnic minorities. We have many opportunities to impact the subdiscipline of rural sociology in the near future. Significant lasting impact can only be obtained through strong, well thought out, collaborative efforts. Our goal is to build these relationships. In the meantime, let me know if you are interested in joining our growing network.

Rural sociology may not be necessary, but organized rural sociologists can make a difference in helping particular segments of the American rural population improve their circumstances. In reference to rural minorities, I suspect their general interests and needs will receive little attention unless we in rural sociology focus some of our attention on them.

NOTES

1. I consider racial groups to be one important kind of ethnic group. Consequently, from this point on when I use the later term, it will include the former.
2. Those contributing to this research synthesis were Tom Durant, Jr. (LSU), Bill Payne, Jr. (USDA), Clark Knowlton and myself.
3. I will send a copy of my position paper giving a detailed analysis of the amount of visible research output going on among members of the RSS to anyone who wants it.
4. A listing of these and their addresses is available upon request.

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The Rural Sociologist

VOLUME 9, NO. 3

SUMMER 1989



The Forum:
Social Science Research
on Biotechnology and
Agriculture
