

SEMANTIC COMPLEXITIES IN DEFINING RURALITY: Towards a Definition Based on Human Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Semantic complexities abound when attempting to define rurality, because the supposed rural/urban dialectic is actually diffuse. This paper explores some of these problems of meaning and proposes a definition of rurality based on human considerations. Whilst research and professional expertise are needed to assist in the development of rural regions, they must encompass the subjective views of what ruralism is to rural people to be effective. Acknowledging the perceptual framework of rural residents will allow a more authentic conception of rurality to inform policy implementation and service provision.

INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century draws to a close, population explosion, environmental degradation, and economic mismanagement of natural and human resources are major problems facing today's international community. In the multi-dimensional search for solutions to these problems, the world community is looking to rural regions.

Education can potentially play a major role in the perceived need for rural revival. Rural education in Australia however, inadequately responds to the multifarious nature of non-metropolitan regions. Whilst it constantly explores relevant approaches to address real need, rural residents continue to suffer inequity of educational outcome (Bessant, 1978, p128). The result is reduced participation in the socio-cultural, economic and political processes in Australian society and minimal access to the wealth, status and power which signifies success in our nation.

To remedy such inequality, a greater understanding of education and rurality is required. There are some semantic problems however, associated with defining rurality. Focussing on the context of education in rural and remote areas will illustrate these difficulties of definition. First I will show how even factual data like geographic and demographic factors, cause problems in delineating rurality. I will then examine subjective descriptors of rurality seeking to identify whether these clarify or confuse the definition. Following this I will show how the economic situation is crucial to discussing rurality. A discussion of the impact of rural issues on schooling follows. Throughout I show that the boundaries of the urban/rural dialectic are diffuse. Finally I will propose a tentative definition of rurality which will incorporate yet extend some features of previous definitions whilst focussing on human rather than economic considerations.

GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTORS - A STARTING POINT OR IS IT?

In defining rurality a good starting point is distinguishing populations residing in rural from urban areas. The Commonwealth Schools Commission report (CSC, 1988, p1) states that in area non-metropolitan Australia covers 95% of the total land mass. The report defines rural Australia by geographic zones so that areas outside a 50km radius of the greater metropolitan regions are deemed rural (CSC, 1988, p23). This includes cities of 50,000 population however, which have similar services to the greater metropolitan areas.

Further problems emerge when delineating the concept by sub-dividing into rural and remote. Griffith (1992, p53), using time and distance from access to services makes two levels of rural distinction. 150km's from a 10,000 population centre was considered rural. 300km's or more requiring an over night stay for access to the same service was considered remote. However towns such as Alice Springs do not easily fit this definition. With a population of 24,000 approximately this regional service centre has many urban amenities. Yet its remoteness from the closest major towns gives it many characteristics of rural Australia.

Attempts to classify rural and remote by using population density or degrees of remoteness as a measure of access to services are also problematic. Neither approach allows for variation in access to services in like populations domiciled in areas of similar distance. Also, if Local Government Areas or Statistical Local Areas are used as units of measurement the end result is averaged data hiding salient features of rurality (Griffith, 1992, p54)). To define rurality by geographic or demographic features therefore is far too exclusionary.

PERCEPTUAL DESCRIPTORS OF RURALITY - CLARIFICATION OR CONFUSION?

Rural denotes non-metropolitan and entails concepts of dispersed population; distance from service centres; industries relating to agriculture, forestry, and mining; and vulnerability to harsh climactic conditions. Rural has perceptual connotations however, which complicate a precise definition.

Isolation, interpreted as remoteness from services, is a term frequently used to describe rural life (Lawrence, 1987, p52). Yet the quality of services accessible to large remote stations by virtue of private plane access is often better than those available to small country towns (Humphreys, 1991, p20). The 'tyranny of distance' then is not an absolute in determining specific locational disadvantage.

Isolation has a perceptual framework. Aboriginals view 'isolation' with different meanings. The excessive distance between their communities and large population centres is seen as an advantage (Redman, 1991, p8). The remote areas in which traditional Aboriginals tend to reside, provide significant cultural maintenance opportunities indicating for them, isolation is an urban not a rural factor.

Alienation from socio-cultural processes is often experienced by urban residents who through unemployment, poverty, cultural or linguistic difference have restricted access to adequate services despite metropolitan domicile. Isolation then is not a legitimate descriptor of rurality, because it can describe the experience of city-dwellers as well (Dept of the Prime Minister & Cabinet, 1988, p12).

Another implicit component of 'rurality' is disadvantage. Rural location however, is not viewed by non-urban residents as an impediment to lifestyle (Redman, 1991, p8). They have chosen rural living for perceptual reasons along with economic and hereditary ones. A slower pace, strong community spirit, and a better quality of family life are some reasons people choose to maintain a rural lifestyle. A reversal from urban to rural perspectives of what constitutes disadvantage in rurality is required therefore in research and policy development.

The focus should be ways in which official bodies can enhance the benefits of rural life (Darnell, 1981, p34,). Since neither isolation nor disadvantage are exclusive descriptions of rural lifestyle however, yet both are equated with specifically rural conditions, clarification of what is essentially rural is thwarted.

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION - THE RAW REALITY OF RURAL LIVING

In defining rurality, economic circumstances which impact on rural life must be analyzed. We live in an international community of interactive market economies. Rural communities are directly subject to international economic caprices (Lawrence, 1987, p52).

Since 1960 technology and improved management practices have reshaped Australian farming, leading to larger farms and a significant decline in the rural labour force (Lawrence, 1987, p42). For primary producers this restructuring and economic decline, has signified alteration in farm operations and lifestyle. Negative farm incomes have become a reality (Harrold, 1987, p5). With escalating costs, high loan interest rates, greater susceptibility to the economic vagaries of the international market, and reduced expenditure on improvements, the average farmer is in a position of dramatically increased debt and severely reduced income (Harrold, 1987, p9).

Poverty is the outcome of these harsh conditions (Humphries, 1991, p23) and bankruptcy and/or migration to the cities is often the only solution. For small farmers who stay there are serious lifestyle consequences. Farming families now work longer hours, perform the labour normally contracted out, reduce capital outlay on the farm, work elsewhere to supplement income, and forego luxuries like holidays (Lippert, 1993 p10).

Poor health in rural populations is another human cost of rural decline. Increasing health problems in the country are exacerbated by restricted access to services. There is 10% more illness and 28% more hypertension and psychiatric disorder in rural than in urban areas (Lawrence, 1987, p43). As options open to farming families decrease stress related illnesses, domestic violence and suicides have increased (Lawrence, 1991, p23). These health problems are often a factor of socio-economic status which has significantly declined in rural areas (Lippert, 1993, p3).

This human cost of the economic downturn also affects small service towns. The population of small towns supporting farm communities has dropped (Lawrence, 1987, p48) and those who live on farms have fewer opportunities to supplement farm income. As the population decrease continues, service provisions are curtailed. Those who manage to stay have to travel further for school health and administrative services, thus being further disadvantaged (Lippert, 1993, p11).

The rural economic situation seems straightforward: population decline, migration off the farms, closure of rural business, and overall economic depression. Farmers and town workers have generally headed for regional rather than urban areas however, since urban unemployment and poverty are also great. So the population in the overall rural area is stabilizing with many regional centres actually increasing in size at the expense of surrounding small towns and farms (Kapferer, 1990, p95).

Lower socio-economic status, increasing unemployment and declining health are common problems to rural and urban areas. The population redistribution within rural areas and the fluid boundaries between rural and urban issues render a precise definition of rurality difficult.

THE IMPACT OF RURAL ISSUES ON SCHOOLING.

Rural education is characterised by diversity. Low population density, distance, and remoteness are factors of rural living which directly affect rural schools. School rolls are small, staffing low, access to resources and equipment restricted, curriculum choice limited and extensive travel necessary for children to attend school. Access to schooling in remote regions is severely restricted so that distance education, school of the air and boarding school options become the alternatives.

Economic decline affects rural education. Population decrease increases the likelihood of rural school closure. The harsher economic conditions of contemporary rural lifestyle force children to work longer on the family farm (Lawrence, 1987, p45). Ability to participate in learning at school must be severely restricted as a result.

Dwindling incomes in the rural sector mean that parents are finding it difficult to finance education. Immediate outcomes are: a decrease in the number of rural students completing secondary school (CSC, 1988, p19) because boarding school or relocation are no longer feasible; and reduced opportunities to foster the extended socio-cultural activities deemed necessary for the development of rural children (Redman, 1991, p10).

As with defining rurality, rural/urban divisions in rural education are not straightforward. A major problem for rural schooling is its urban-based organisation and cultural framework (Bessant, 1978, p126). It alienates rural children who cannot identify with the ethos of the centralised education system. It is not a particularly rural phenomenon, however. Once again urban and rural boundaries are diffuse.

Many education problems are considered rural: the high cost in providing or accessing education in rural settings; restricted physical access to schools because of isolation; negative small community attitudes to education; high staff turnover; inadequate preparation in teacher education for professional and private lives in small rural communities (CSC, 1988, p1). These also feature in urban schools however, particularly in lower socio-economic areas (Bessant, 1978, p129). Similarly the lack of employment opportunities, low levels of basic literacy skills, lower participation in upper secondary school and higher education, limited socio-cultural opportunities, encountered by rural students are also the experience of urban students marginalised from the mainstream.

Distance education adds to the difficulty in deriving identifiable meanings from the concept 'rurality'. Whilst distance education makes schooling from isolated homes possible, it also assists students at school wanting to take subjects unavailable on the curriculum, and others who for health reasons cannot attend school. It often overcomes the disruption of schooling for itinerant families. It serves special education needs in country schools and assists adults who wish to further their education without discontinuing work or changing location. So even in describing one form of education normally considered rural, I am describing a service which provides for the educational needs of people who often reside in the city.

Education then is a feature of non-urban Australia which contributes to the semantic problems in defining rurality. In education it is not rural or urban domicile alone which denotes disadvantage but class, gender, and culture orientation in the face of structural inequality. This is not to deny the specific problems faced by rural education but to suggest that distinguishing the real differences from the imagined (Bessant, 1978, p130,) is important so that a clear-cut understanding of rurality and a more action-based campaign to address the problems, become possible.

RURALITY - A DEFINITION BASED ON HUMAN CONSIDERATIONS.

Exposing urban equivalents in supposedly rural characteristics suggests there is no specific definition of rurality. Yet, there are features of rural living which make it distinctive. I intend to outline a tentative definition of rurality concentrating more on rural perspectives of ruralism than semantic problems of definition and focussing on human rather than economic considerations.

The Australian continent is an extensive land mass comprising much geographic and environmental diversity. Urbanized Australia has 90% of the population living in coastal metropolitan centres. The remaining 10% is scattered throughout 95% of the land mass indicating low population density in non-urban Australia (CSC, 1988, p1).

In defining rurality I have imposed approximate zones which allow for incongruities rather than fixed boundaries on non-metropolitan Australia. I have divided rural Australia into three; regional, rural and remote. Regional includes smaller cities (including Darwin and Hobart) and their immediate surrounds which despite their urban amenities are regional service centres for rural areas. Rural includes small towns and the outlying countryside within a one day return trip to small town service centres. Remote includes small communities living further than a one day's return trip from the nearest small town service centre. Place of residence in relation to population density and geographic terrain is therefore the first indicator of rurality.

The second is level of access to community services. Features of the terrain and climate, and distance from densely populated areas in which the service is located, reduce the availability of services to rural people. When considering funding for improved rural services local variations must be considered.

The third indicator of rurality is industry type. These involve primary production concerns: farming, pastoralism; and other land use industries such as mining, forestry and Aboriginal land maintenance. There are related land use employment areas such as relevant scientific research (CSIRO) and tourism. Those involved with land use industries are subject to economic fluctuations more intensely than urban workers since down-turns could mean not just poverty but cultural, employment, residential, and educational dislocation as well (Lippert, 1993, p8).

The fourth indicator of rurality is population make-up. Primary producers and those who supply services to them are two categories. Itinerant groups such as public servants and seasonal workers whose needs are different from stable rural residents, are a significant section of the population. Also concentration of indigenous or specific migrant groups in certain areas will make the needs of that rural region unique. Another growing group of rural residents whom Darnell (1981, p30) calls neo-ruralists comprises professionals, retirees, and leisure seekers attracted to a rural lifestyle. Distinguishing the varying groups lifestyles in rural regions will assist in identifying needs and making policy implementation relevant.

My fifth indicator of rurality includes subjective views of ruralism. Rural residents have strong views on rural living. Strong community and individual identity, intra-community self-reliance, and quality family life are some reasons for preferring rural life-style. People embrace rurality because they see it as conducive to a healthy, happy lifestyle. Where urban people see the disadvantages in rural living (Darnell, 1981, p34), rural residents focus on the benefits. Distance, lack of access to services and small schools certainly cause rural people concern but they see them as factors of rural living with benefits to be enhanced and problems to be solved, not as disadvantages to be addressed.

Survival in remote regions is dependent upon the development of multi-dimensional skills and harnessing personal resources of initiative. Extreme weather conditions, harsh terrain, erratic communication until recently, and remoteness from towns, expertise and supplies, have honed these qualities. Such attributes considered rural by rural dwellers could be better used in the drive to improve rural education and other services. Allowing rural residents to use community initiative to solve local problems of rurality will restore local control (Redman, 1991, p14), and enhance strategies for achieving rural revival.

Such diverse features makes rurality a complex amalgam of differences which renders definition complex. In approaching rural concerns we must acknowledge this very diversity which benefits rural Australia. The economic and environmental interdependence of rural, national and international concerns, suggest recommendations are needed for arriving at this change in approach to rural issues. The first suggestion is a move from centralised to local administration of services in rural areas. Variation in industry, in population type, in environmental and economic factors, suggests that residents have a deeper understanding of the official input

required to maintain the economic viability and cultural lifestyle continuity of their particular rural region than city based officials with little experience of specific rural localities.

The second suggestion is to desist from defining rurality on the basis of rural/urban divisions. There are too many commonalities to make such a distinction viable (Kapferer, 1990, p92). It detracts from the important issue; improving the quality of life for rural and remote Australians to which they are entitled regardless of their relationship to urban centres. Concentrating on what rural residents perceive to be important issues in rural living (Redman, 1991, p13) rather than on arbitrary rural/urban divisions will lead to more experiential understanding of rurality.

While economic decline in rural Australia is of concern, too much emphasis is placed on the disadvantages it causes rural Australians. More attention should be given to the structural problems inherent in the economic political, educational processes which maintain rural decline (Lippert, 1993, p1). Today's economic climate impedes rural Australians but official focus should not be solely on economic considerations. This leads to interpreting development as money-making, rather than as enhancing individual and community lifestyle.

The political, economic, legal and education structures in Australia need to incorporate a more relevant definition of rurality to make their policy implementation more meaningful. They also need to expose embedded inequalities in their systems which both disadvantage the groups they are trying to assist and remove control from them.

Moreover if Kitchen's 'revitalized ruralism' (Kitchen, 1989 p19) is to become a possibility policy makers will have to be mindful of the changing nature of rurality. Rural Australia has not always been in economic decline so discussions of economic problems and rurality must acknowledge it as a contemporary phenomenon. Variation in population distribution, the growing itinerant population, diversification of family farm businesses all attest to this multi-faceted new direction of living in rural Australia.

CONCLUSION

Rurality is a way of life for many Australians. Its diversity and continual change present difficulties rather than disadvantages for those who choose a rural lifestyle. The institutions of Australian society need to recognize this in approaching service provision for rural people. More local administrative control, attention to local variation in rural experience, and tailoring official responses to perceived needs derived from a subjective appreciation of rurality are all necessary to ensure an improved quality of lifestyle in rural regions. Concentrating on enhancing existing benefits of rural lifestyle, on utilizing local initiative to solve perceived problems, and on reversing the adverse affects of corporate business on the rural economy will help to ensure the rural dweller can participate in the social, political economic processes which affect his/her life chances.

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