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ABSTRACT

While many recent publications have explored aging in rural America, virtually none have examined differences within a rural environment in terms of public policy issues. It is very likely, however, that residing on a farm has different consequences than residing in a village. The elderly in the country may be particularly disadvantaged when they are compared to their town counterparts because of their relative isolation from services and health facilities. This study examined the farm/country and village/town microecologies in terms of their characteristics and divergent impacts on the aged in Allegany County, New York, a rural area of approximately 50,000 citizens of which 6,000 are elderly. Interviews were conducted with a proportionate stratified sample of older residents (N=456) of Allegany County. A frequency analysis revealed that the majority of respondents resided within a village or town (67%) with the remainder living on a farm or in a nondeveloped area (33%). Pearson's r's revealed many significant demographic differences between the two groups. The farm/country aged were more mobile, less depressed, more likely to be married, less educated, and younger than their town/village counterparts. In terms of knowledge and use of social services, the country aged reported less use of public services, but received greater satisfaction from them. Findings have implications for public policy issues and the delivery of social services and programs to the rural elderly. (Author/NB)

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Aging in Rural America

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While there has been a proliferation of publications recently concerned with the experiences of aging in rural America, virtually none of these studies has examined differences within a rural environment in terms of public policy issues. For example, it is very likely that residing on a farm versus residing in a village has different consequences. The elderly in the country may be particularly disadvantaged when they are compared to their town counterparts because of their relative isolation from services and health facilities.

The goal of this study was to statistically examine the farm/country and village/town microecologies in terms of their characteristics and divergent impacts on the aged in Allegany County--a rural, Appalachian designated area in upstate Western New York of approximately 50,000 citizens of which 6,000 are elderly.

As a data base for this study, a proportionate stratified sample was used of older Americans residing within Allegany County. Interviewers contacted households from a list provided by the County Office for the Aging; they then alternated selections of male and female respondents. 456 useable interviews were obtained. Of those contacted and capable of being interviewed, 80 percent responded.

A frequency analysis revealed the majority resided within a village or town (67%) with a large proportion living on a farm or in a nondeveloped area (33%).

Pearson's r's revealed many significant demographic differences. The farm/country aged were more mobile, less depressed, likely to be married, possessed less education, and were younger than their town/village age-mates. They were also more likely to be recent arrivals and to have fewer social contacts. In terms of knowledge and use of social services, the country aged reported less use of public services, but received greater satisfaction from them. Although recognizing some limitations in generalization to other samples, the implications of these findings were discussed in terms of public policy issues and the delivery of social services and programs to the rural aged.

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Aging in Rural America

Understanding the need for services and their utilization in rural America has become a subject of recent interest to professionals and researchers alike in the field of aging. A key difficulty in adequately understanding the needs of the rural elderly is that the term 'rural' itself has been poorly conceptualized and operationalized by researchers. Current studies have defined rurality as reflecting a wide variety of social ecologies ranging from a population area such as rural farm, rural nonfarm, and towns and cities all the way up to 50,000 in population. Perhaps this practice partially stems from the myth of "rural homogeneity."

Anecdotally, I can understand why the term "rural" is defined so broadly. Years ago, I moved to a small town in Indiana from the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Often times, the town-folks discussed "going to the country" as though it was a different place from where they resided. I was mystified by this expression, as the entire state of Indiana appeared to be the "country" to me. However, one fine morning I drove through "town" into the "country." Instantly, I understood what the country was as clearly as if there were physical markers welcoming me into "God's country."

Not only do the natives perceive physical differences demarcating the country versus the village, they also perceived real personality differences between those who choose to live in town and those who choose not to. A number of researchers agree as they have shown the importance of the neighborhood environments for the older person's personality and state of wellbeing (e.g., Lawton, Neuhoff and Yeh, 1980).

In part, the following research was an early exploratory study aimed at investigating the impact of micro-ecologies within a rural environment. The purpose of this study was to divide a rural community in upstate Western New York into two environments: farm/country versus relatively small incorporated villages and compare the program needs, accessibility, usage, and satisfaction of the elderly (over 60 years of age) who reside in these respective communities. It was expected that these findings would have implications for public policy and program planners in rural America.

The study of aging populations and their needs in rural areas is important because of the recent demographic changes that reveal significant proportion of the aged reside in rural areas. While the trend from 1900 through 1970 was for people of all ages to migrate from the rural areas to metropolitan areas, this trend began to reverse in the 1970's. Since then the elderly population in rural areas has been increasing at a faster rate than it has in urban areas. For example, in 1978 there was an increase in the elderly population of 19.8 percent in rural areas and of only 12.2 percent in urban areas. These trends are continuing. The geographic territory that is defined as rural is considerable. Of America's 3,135 counties, 70% of them have fewer than 50,000 persons and 64% of the states (32) have fewer than 100 persons per square mile. Depending on how rurality is defined, anywhere from 33 to 40% of the nations' total elderly population is rural. (See Kim, 1981, for a review.)

Moreover, as the proportion of the area's population that is elderly increases, the population size decreases which suggests greater proportional need in rural areas for services. Yet rural residents have received an inequitable share of federal dollars for public programs (see Kim, 1981, for a review). For example, they qualify for less social security benefits and they receive less supplemental assistance despite the fact that food and heating costs are higher in rural areas. To further rub salt into the wound, the Office of Management and Budget poverty guidelines are 14 to 15 percent lower for rural residents (Krout, 1986).

The need for public policy planners to review and reevaluate their rural programs is apparent. In revising old policy and developing new policy, public planners must keep in mind that there are sub-environments within a rural area that require different programs and services; one program does not fit the needs of everyone.

The planners need to consider carefully the interaction between the individual and the environment is not a new notion. Indeed, this notion has its theoretical roots in Lewin's (1951) model that proposes that behavior is a function of the interaction between the person and his environment and Murray's (1938) congruence model that states behavior is a consequence of personal needs and environmental press.

More recently, Eva Kehana (1975) and M. Powell Lawton (1977) have conceptually applied the congruence model in considering the person-environment dynamics of adjustment among older people. According to the congruence model, people seek environments that match their needs and lifestyles. Dissonance between the environmental press and perceived need leads either to adaptation or to "leaving the field." If the person is unable to leave the field, the individual functions in a dissonant milieu; stress and discomfort must follow.

This model has generally been applied to the study of wellbeing among the elderly and not public policy and planning. However, it clearly suggests that poor public planning will lead to an incongruent environment, and good public planning, a congruent one.

Much of the earlier experimental work investigating the goodness of fit of the older person with his environment as a predictor of wellbeing focused on neighborhood housing but rarely included the rural/urban dimension. Although Lawton et al. (1980) found that environments generally had small residual effects, they concluded that environmentally based interventions could enhance wellbeing which were more often practical than interventions strategies that focused on changing the individual.

This environmental approach has been extended by Paul Windley and Rich Schmidt (1980). They investigated the wellbeing of older Americans according to their degree of rurality. Utilizing a 3 x 3 sampling matrix, of three degrees of rurality based on town size (population ranging from 0-500, from 501--1500, and 1501 to 2500), they anticipated that wellbeing was indirectly affected by the ecological/architectural factors.

This hypothesis was confirmed. Step-wise regression analyses demonstrated the importance of environmental variables in the wellbeing among rural elderly although the amount of variance explained by the person environment fit model (as in the Lawton et al., 1980, study) was small.

While the above studies focused on the relationship between the micro-ecologies and wellbeing of the aged, no published study has examined the relationship of the goodness of fit model within a rural area on public policy and program use. Although our study was exploratory, it represented a first attempt to do so. Consonant with the goodness of fit model, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1) Because people living in incorporated villages have greater accessibility to social services due to their closer proximity, they should have greater awareness, use and satisfaction with services provided for them.

H2) Because rural areas are reputed to be disadvantaged regarding education, health, housing, and transportation when compared to their more urban counterparts, it was anticipated that with greater rurality there would be greater person-environmental incongruence and consequently increased discomfort, stress and strain and decreased wellbeing as compared to their resource-rich village counterparts.

H3) Based on the premises of H1 and H2 it was expected that greater rurality would be associated with fewer services available and accessible and lower rates of service awareness and utilization.

SUBJECTS

The respondents to this study were selected from a list of county residents 60 and over in age. The list was provided by the local Office on the Aging and gave access to an estimated 5,250 persons, 65% of the county's elderly populations. A total of 456 subjects were interviewed. Of those who were contacted 82% responded. Some biases were noted. For example, our subjects were noninstitutionalized elderly and disproportionately female. The latter was partly accounted for by the large number of females in our study were more willing to participate than males. Unfortunately, we did not canvas hospitals and nursing homes because the administrators repeatedly turned away our interviewers from contacting the institutionalized individuals.

The average age for our sample was 74 years, 99% were Caucasian, 43% were married, 40% were widowed, and average level of education was 11 years.

ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

To assess the program awareness and service needs of our subjects, we used and amended form of the Administrations on Aging Questionnaire for Older Americans.

PROCEDURE

A proportionate stratified cluster sample was utilized for the survey. Townships within the county were clustered--half were selected. In order to insure proper representation townships were randomly sampled from strata constructed by township size and location. Interviewers were instructed to contact the households sampled from the list and to assess the number of persons 60 and over in residence. They were instructed to alternate their inquiry between a male and female respondents.

DEFINITION OF RURALITY

The subjects were classified as residing in a rural ecology if they lived on a farm or outside a village boundary. Subjects residing within a village boundary represented the comparison group. The largest village population was approximately 5000 people, the average village population was 2000 people.

RESULTS

A frequency breakdown of rural residents of the 456 participants indicated that 147 of them lived in the country or on a farm (32.2%) while 307 lived in a village (67.3%); for two respondents there was no data (.4%).

A Pearson's product moment correlation on demographic variables was performed with rurality and showed a number of small, residual, but significant differences between the two groups. (See table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The data indicated country of farm residents were newer to the area (.25), more mobile (.12), less educated, (-.12), less politically active (-.11) younger (-.09) and more likely to be married (.11) and more likely to own homes than their village counterparts.

In addition, country and farm elderly were significantly less stressed (.08) less depressed (.07) less physically infirm (.06) and less likely to use programs provided by the county office for the aging; but when they did use the services they were more satisfied than were their village counterparts.

No one variable was found to underlie these differences; partial correlations controlling for group membership, age, gender, and level of education revealed similar correlations on the dependent variables. Controlling for the four variables of age, education, group membership and gender reduced the number of significant correlations between the two groups suggesting an interaction effect. When the four variables were controlled for we found that the village resident was depressed (.08) less politically active (-.06) and was less satisfied with community service programs (.06).

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

The most interesting and unexpected finding was the recency and extreme isolation country residents. They were found to be less likely to have lived in the neighborhood 15 or more years, less likely to visit neighbors regularly or fairly often, less likely to feel part of the neighborhood, and less likely to have all or most of their friends live in the area. They were also more mobile as they were more likely to feel that they may leave the area and more interested in moving than their village counterparts. The above findings suggest (coupled with their high morale) that the country "personality" prefers more isolation, and more personal space and presumably more independence than does the town "personality".

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis was partially supported in that the elderly residing within the two environments differed significantly on a number of demographic variables. However, the actual amount of variance explained while significant was modest.

The second hypothesis was not supported in that greater rurality was not associated with higher incongruence, stress, and strain and lower morale. Just the opposite was true.

The third hypothesis was generally supported in that greater rurality was associated with lower level of education, greater social isolation, but not with dissatisfaction with housing or transportation. Two findings are of considerable interest: (1) greater rurality was associated with greater mobility and younger age; and 2) greater rurality was associated with less awareness and use of available programs although they were more satisfied with the services when they utilized them.

These findings suggest that the incongruent environment is unexpectedly the village. Village residents tended to be older, and although they received more programs and were more aware of them they were less satisfied with the services, and felt greater stress and more negative affect than their rural counterparts (albeit the differences between the groups were small).

We suspect that a possible reason for these unexpected findings may be the following: as people age, and as their spouses die they are more likely to move to the village where they have greater access to needed services. But in moving into the villages, they have moved into an environmental context that may be incongruent with their preferred life styles and consequently they are susceptible to greater stress and dissatisfaction.

Lawton et al. (1980) has shown that moving to a non-preferred residence is associated with decreased well-being. To remedy this problem we suggest that public policy planners need to consider two options. One they need to advocate/advertise their programs more successfully to rural residents in that rural residents were less aware of programming available to them. Second, they should consider developing outreach programs aimed at helping the country residents maintain themselves in their preferred habitat. As rural elderly residents are less trustful and less open to change and new ideas (Maiden & Peterson, 1987), a creative personal advocacy approach is required. Simply distributing flyers or informational brochures will fail.

Although it should be noted that this was an early exploratory study, it does suggest that the rural elderly require greater attention from public policy planners than they currently receive. Through more adequate consideration of the differential needs of our elderly, rural planners could provide a better quality life for older rural Americans.

Table 1. Frequencies: Rural Residence. N=456

| Live: | <u>N</u> | <u>%</u> |
|----------------------------|------------|--------------|
| In country or on a farm | 147 | 32.2% |
| In a village | 307 | 67.3% |
| No response | <u>002</u> | <u>00.4%</u> |
| | <u>456</u> | <u>99.9%</u> |

Table 2. Pearson r's: Daily Living Variables with Rurality

Rurality (0=village; 1=country or farm)

| | |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| Age | -.09** |
| Married | .11*** |
| Roots | -.25**** |
| Group Membership | -.11*** |
| Homeowner | .10** |
| Housing Satisfaction | -.05 |
| Mobility | .12*** |
| Bradburn-positive affect | .01 |
| Bradburn-negative affect | -.07* |
| Life Satisfaction | .03 |
| ADL deficits | -.02 |
| Physical infirmity | -.06* |
| Isolation | .05 |
| Stress Index | -.08** |
| Need Level | .01 |
| Memory Lapses | -.01 |
| Income | -.05 |
| Education | -.12*** |
| Internal Locus of Control | .00 |
| Political Efficacy | -.03 |
| Political Interest | -.03 |
| Civic/Political participant | -.11 |
| Program Awareness | -.05 |
| Contact with Bureaucracy | .02 |
| Program Use | -.07* |
| Program Satisfaction | .07* |
| Poor Nutrition | .02 |
| Poor Health | -.03 |
| Female Gender | .05 |

* p .10
 ** p .05
 *** p .01
 **** p .001

Table 3. Partial Correlation: Dependent variables with rural residence, controlling education, gender, group membership, and age.

| | <u>Partial</u> |
|---|----------------|
| Bradburn Positive Affect | .01 |
| Bradburn Negative Affect | -.08* |
| Life Satisfaction | .03 |
| Internal Locus of Control | .00 |
| Political Efficacy | -.01 |
| Political Interest | .00 |
| Civic Orientations (Efficacy and Interest) | -.02 |
| Political Participation Index | -.06* |
| Program Awareness | -.02 |
| Contacted a Bureaucracy | .04 |
| Program Use | -.04 |
| Program Satisfaction | .06* |

* p .10

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