

Coping with the effects of rural poverty sociology essay



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Transformations in agriculture, natural resource management, exploited tourism, and absentee ranch ownership have changed the face of many rural communities. Several of these changes and other factors have led many rural communities to experience serious declines in their economies during the past decades. These changes have been exacerbated by recent economic hardships further depleting the economy and resources of rural communities. Thus, the precursors and consequences of poverty for families in these communities deserve attention. While Wilson (1987) brought the demographic changes related to urban poverty to light, larger explanations of rural poverty have been less of a research focus. Families living in rural communities are sometimes expected to be buffered by the effects of poverty by maintaining strong family and community connections. However, many of the changes related to family structures and community involvement that often lead to negative outcomes have also become characteristics of rural living (MacTavish & Salamon, 2003). In studying rural families in poverty, I propose two theoretical perspectives, symbolic interaction theory and social exchange theory that can help guide research and illuminate some of the issues related to families in poverty in such communities.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbols are used by humans, according to their contexts, to describe the meaning behind physical objects and occurrences. Socialization is considered the propellant of symbols in society. Individuals comprehend situations through symbols and perceived roles of self and others. Human behaviors actualize through the process of perceiving symbols and roles (White & Kline, <https://assignbuster.com/coping-with-the-effects-of-rural-poverty-sociology-essay/>)

2002; Blumer, 1967; Mead). Thus, symbolic interaction theory emphasizes how people perceive themselves within and outside the family environment. Several assumptions are captured in this theory, including that people live in a symbolic world, people learn about selves through interactions with others, individuals have minds and can analyze the self, and people learn their roles within society from the society (White & Kline, 2002). Thus, images and symbols are found throughout the ecological system, including how the individual perceives, family interactions, and community interactions found within a rural community. Symbols about rural living are also carried throughout the broader macro system and expectations of the larger society. Symbolic interaction sheds light on rural families coping in poverty on two important fronts. First, understanding the symbols, meaning, and interactions related to poor families in the community can bring awareness to communities and hopefully allow for more social mobility among their residents. Second, understanding the symbols, meanings, and interactions within the family can help families sense of cohesion and ability to cope (Kaplan & Hennon, 1990; Turner).

Stigmatized symbols related to poverty are often made explicit as a person conducts their daily life. For example, using food stamps at the grocery store especially in a small community is in full view. A family in poverty cannot hide this in private life; there is typically not a front about this (Goffman, 1963). Poor youth in schools will confront meanings about the clothes they wear (name brand or not) and what it means to stand in line for a free or reduced lunch. Students from families who may be struggling to make ends meet may need to stay in after school programs which may also hold a

negative connotation with other school youth (McLoyd et al. 2009; Pogash, 2008). These negative connections to symbols may follow families and youth throughout a lifetime in rural communities. For example, a parent may have a poor interaction with the youth's school, not knowing how to navigate its systems. The school may then come to expect a child's poor actions and soon a youth may experience this in the grocery store and throughout the community. These interactions may then be tied to a family name. This addresses one of the several mechanisms through which stratification in a community is maintained by legitimatizing certain stereotypes (source). These are beliefs that are widely accepted and taken for granted, for instance the meaning behind a family name. Furthermore, there may be symbolic people in the community who maintain power and perhaps perpetuate poverty within a community (Bourdieu, 1986). A person may be in charge of a manufacturing company and the workers must buy all manufactured owned products by shopping at the manufacturing grocery store. Then everything goes back into the system where a small group of people or one family retains power. For example, plantation owners gave low wage jobs to keep poor in "their place" and limited their education which equaled low literacy rates for workers. Thus, people in poverty cannot move upward. This has often also happen through racism in the US. Thus, it would be important to understand who has the symbolic power in a community and it may be important to trace this back further than expected in order to clearly understand the history of a region and how certain families have maintained power or even remained poor (Duncan, 1996). A lack of distrust of certain families can occur and arbitrary power can be carried over into the state of contemporary communities. Hence, people forget to see the political

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nature of their problems and poverty gets seen as a personal problem as highlighted through Mill's (1956) concept on the sociological imagination.

Finally, the researcher may meet with families to understand how symbols within their one family unit are carried out. This has been used as a helpful therapy tool for families in conflict. Many poor families experience extreme stress related to a lack of resources and so understanding the role strain within families and different meanings attributed to certain actions would also be important for families in poverty (Kaplan & Hennon, 1990; Turner; Seccombe, 2006).

Thus, regarding research questions, the researcher may pose several inquiries related to the symbolic power in the community and the symbolism related to being poor in the community. The researcher would ask about the certain families that have power in the community. What does it mean to live in a certain area of town? What actions are socially approved in the community? When do you feel like your family is not receiving social approval? How is social status distributed in the community? Also, family members would be asked how they view their specific situation within their family. What burdens do they experience because of their role in the family? What is the meaning behind certain conflicts in their family?

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory can help researchers consider why families stay in their communities when there may be other alternatives out of poverty if they moved. Social exchange theory describes the characteristics and motivations for humans' social behaviors by a system of perceived rewards <https://assignbuster.com/coping-with-the-effects-of-rural-poverty-sociology-essay/>

and costs. Social exchange theory arose out of utilitarian ideas, emphasizing how people are motivated to act in relationships by maximizing their perceived rewards and minimizing their perceived costs. A reward is anything perceived as a benefit to an individual, family, or relational unit; costs are anything perceived as a reward forgone. Social exchange theory asserts that people rationally calculate while assessing decisions based on the profit ratio of costs and rewards (White & Kline, 2002). Theorist such as Homans (1961) believed in generalized rewards that most people would adhere to – he suggested social approval as the main generalized reward and motivator for humans. Other theorists have proposed generalized rewards such as love, personal attraction, instrumental services, respect, and power (Blau, 1964), status, services, goods, information, and money (Foa & Foa, 1980), autonomy, predictability, security, agreement, and equality of resources (Nye, 1979).

Thus, a researcher would assume that a family would rationally calculate about why they decide to stay in a rural environment in poverty when there may be other alternatives. The researcher would want to understand how families' situations may apply to the described rewards or costs above. The other alternatives for families must also be understood. The value and meaning of living in a rural community must be elucidated; thus, ideas related to symbolic interaction would also be employed to enhance understanding. On one hand, families' choice to live in a rural environment may have higher benefits compared to the costs of living in an urban environment. We must understand what the costs mean to families. The benefits and costs may relate to rural living sentiments (Elder & Conger,

2000). Rural families may view a huge cost associated with moving and starting over in a new community. A benefit for staying would be familiarity, perhaps a connection to the land, and social supports in the community (Elder & Conger, 2000). However, a cost of living in the rural environment may be unsteady work and lack of job opportunities. We might also want to consider why poor young adults would choose to stay in the rural community versus leaving the rural community. The researcher would want to understand the costs and benefits of things associated with leaving and going. What are the social stigmas associated with staying or leaving? What job opportunities, educational attainment, marriage choices, and lifestyle choices exist relative to leaving or staying? We would also want to clearly understand the comparison levels of alternatives for the families in poverty. If they see limited job opportunities in new areas, the comparison level is low and they will not be motivated to move. This may be the case for young adults as well, if they view the comparison level of alternatives as low they will likely stay where they are. However, if the comparison level of alternatives is high, they will likely move and change their situation (White & Kline, 2002). Homans (1961) also thought people gravitate toward social equals as people can gain more social approval this way, what he labeled "the cost of inferiority". This may help explain why certain parts of a town remain more poverty stricken as people with similar social and human capital gravitate toward one another. It might also be important to understand how this has worked out in community life in a rural environment.

The researchers may also want to understand these choices at a larger macro level. In this view, parents, schools, and government make investments in the human and social capital of families and children (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994; Strauss). Thus, the researcher may meet with community leaders to understand how they are investing in poor families and youth to understand their cost to benefit ratio. Do they see investments in the social mobility of families as reaping long term benefits that outweigh the social problems related to poverty?

Regarding specific research questions, we would want to ask specifically what the advantages of staying in the rural community are. What are the costs of leaving and what are the costs of staying? We would want to clearly understand the meaning of the costs and rewards through in depth qualitative interviews. What does rural living mean to them? These would be similar questions also relevant to the symbolic interaction questions. What symbols are associated with moving and how does this lead to views related to costs or rewards? Why do families live in certain areas of the community? What are the cost and benefits to community leaders of helping poor families with social mobility?

Related to the two theoretical perspectives, the types of data the researcher collects would also be important. Associated to symbolic interaction we would want to do in depth observations in the community trying to understand the different symbols related to statuses and families in the community. This would require observations at several institutions; the researchers would meet with people from all different power statuses within the community. We would hopefully gain access to the private life of several

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families where perhaps less filtering is done (Goffman, 1963). We may ask many clarifying questions related to the symbols and reflect on our own biases about these symbols. We would want to look for places within the community and related to different families where these symbols matched or had discrepancies. Related to social exchange theory, we would likely gain the most information from the in-depth interviews with families and young adults understanding the exact costs and benefits these families associate with their lives. Our work with symbolic interaction theory would most likely enhance our understanding of the benefits and rewards related to these families as they reflect on why they stay or go. Data should also be collected on community leaders regarding their views of the costs and benefits related to assisting poor families in their community.

Limitations

The suggested theories may lead the researcher to many interesting questions and data collection efforts, however, the suggested theories also pose several limitations. Social exchange theory for instance is a bit behaviorist, implying all human interaction is a response to a benefit/cost ratio. Researchers must account for the symbols related to rewards and costs as rewards may be unseen and not understood by others. A closed system of understanding rewards may be found in several communities (Acock). Clearly defining rewards and costs would be an important first step before asserting research entirely from a social exchange theorists view point. Clearly, this is an area where symbolic interaction could enhance social exchange theory.

Furthermore, asserting that humans always act rationally may be an overstatement. Social exchange theory may also not account for individuals of younger ages who have not fully developed their ability to calculate rationally. Social exchange theory also asserts that individuals are motivated by their own self-interests, some theorists have allowed for people to act in the best interest of their families but clearly understanding the mechanisms of how an individual's desires transform into the family's self-interest may pose a hardship in research (White & Kline, 2002). Understanding these explicit processes is an area for future research. Additionally, decisions based on the profit/cost ratio may be made sub-consciously and bringing this subconscious information into the forefront of research may also pose challenges. However, it is important to examine the cost and rewards associated with why people choose to stay in or leave rural communities as these reasons are critical for the economic vitality and in understanding how to encourage others to move or stay within their community. Understanding these motivations for young adults and youth who will be the face of rural communities in the future is especially important. Understanding the exchanges for families in poverty is also important to ascertain mechanisms that may help their social mobility.

Symbolic interaction may also pose limitations in this study. Symbolic interaction does not deal very well with how people handle emotions (White & Kline, 2002). When looking at coping in poverty, emotions certainly play a large role in how families deal with their situation. Furthermore, this type of research is hard to generalize to other communities or cultures as the symbols used are likely only highly relevant to the community being

researched. Symbolic interaction also emphasizes the importance of meaning to individuals – how the individual views others, is viewed by others, and behaves related to meaning. As this research is specifically studying families, it may be hard to keep the unit of analysis as a family group. Symbolic interaction tends to view the family as a collection of individuals. This may or may not pose issues with the research depending on the unit of analysis of interest.