

Negotiating Race, Culture, & Identity in Rural Community Settings: An Introduction

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This special issue of the Journal of Rural Community Psychology evolved from an article I wrote in the Journal of Counseling and Development in 1999. The article was a critical autobiographical chronicle concerning race and identity. After the article was published, I received numerous email messages and one of them was from Pamela Mulder, editor of this journal. She challenged me on a couple of issues I wrote about and we had a genuine conversation about the intricacies of negotiating cultural identities in a national context where race is tied to so many other factors. From there, she stated that she was planning an issue on culture and identity and invited me to be a part of it.

This special issue is primarily concerned with identity negotiation as it is mitigated by such factors as education, class/economy, employment, environment, and politics of empowerment. This topic began for me with the publication of my first book in 1999, *The Negotiation of Cultural Identity*. I have found it stimulating and exciting to read the pieces included here, which can be characterized as critical studies, empirical studies and theoretic works and which engage the special issue theme from varying perspectives. By adding rural psychology and other disciplinary perspectives to the equation, this volume becomes much more interesting than an average compilation of identity effects studies. This mammoth project was completed with the support of a strong set of patient reviewers who were always willing to serve, even when that meant reading the same article after each revision. The reviewers are noted elsewhere, but I want to acknowledge them here as well. They were Richard Wright (Howard University), Tiffany Townsend and Michelle Miller-Day (both at Penn State University), Tyrome Smith (Fielding Institute), Tina Harris (University of Georgia), Eric Watts (Wake Forest University) and Rhunette Diggs (Denison University). Last but certainly not least, I must thank Celnisha Dangerfield for being the faithful, supportive and arduous editorial assistant.

One of the arguments made here is that much of indigenous cultural values still remains in rural communities fairly unchanged by novel conventions and concerns for technological innovations and contemporariness; yet, that presents some issues of its own. However, the beauty of rural cultural continuity is the interest in preservation of cultural identities. This is certainly true of Native Americans, inhabitants of Appalachia,

and speakers of the Geechi and Gullah dialects. There is a richness that is maintained and it appears almost as a museum relic to those who reside in urban centers.

This special issue begins with an article by Jackson & Stewart that sets the tone for the thematic issue. It is a theoretic overview of the concepts of rurality, culture, and identity negotiation. The authors explain how contemporary psychological models of identity facilitate understanding of personhood as not just a public, but also a private phenomenon. It is processual and yet non-static and non-modal. Identities are conceived as self-definitions, communicatively defined, contracted, negotiated, and still solvent. The authors conclude their piece with a discussion of Jackson's cultural contracts approach and incumbent identity effects among rural African Americans.

Wituk, Commer, Lindstrom & Meisen are next and they discuss the results of their study of Latino parent members of "Parents Helping Parents" (PHPs) self-help groups in one of seven rural counties in Kansas. A 40-item questionnaire was distributed to 119 Latino parents. The study was sponsored by the Kansas Self-Help Network. The results indicated that Latino parents involved in the state's 33 PHPs felt a sense of family strengthening, improved communication skills, enhanced disciplinary skills and program satisfaction. This essay offers a valuable literature review of Latino family communication patterns and identity negotiation issues in rural communities in addition to findings supporting the importance of community intervention programs.

Wilson, Edwards, Alston, Harley & Doughty authored the next essay concerning vocational rehabilitation and the dilemma of race in rural communities. This conceptual-theoretic article notes the historical, social, and psychological issues affecting the cultural identity development of rural African Americans. The authors claim that complete and equitable vocational rehabilitation service delivery to rural African Americans with disabilities is hindered by three major factors: severity of disability, low educational status and limited transportation. These factors have led to a lag in earning potential and contribute to a growing underclass among rural African Americans as well as other minority communities.

Dangerfield's single-authored essay is a nice compliment to the others in the volume, especially Wilson et al's. Dangerfield maps antebellum segregation activities of a rural community in Mississippi, her hometown of Woodville. She utilizes newspaper articles from the local paper, the *Woodville Republican*, to assemble discourses of separation and racism from slavery to the 1960s and beyond. She then notes the effects this hegemonic political action and discourse has had on rural African Americans. Some of the listed factors which impact rural African Americans are as follows: limited educational achievement, stunted emigration activity, limited land ownership, eclipsed voting rights, sustained unemployment, and limited economic resources within the community.

Rodriguez' study is an in-depth theoretic exploration of what he has coined "hyper-suburbs"- suburbia-like enclaves that exist in rural communities throughout the United States. After having explored education, desegregation, economic redlining, and vocational rehabilitation, it is only appropriate that this special issue begin to conclude

with a thinkpiece that coheres these constituent parts into a cogent dialogue about residential choices, political and economic distancing, and obviated human separation. Rodriguez speaks eloquently and passionately about the incumbent effects of “spatial fragmentation” on market values like empathy, compassion, love and caring. He problematizes this emergent cleavage by addressing four factors: shifting population patterns, redrawing of electoral districts, conservative voting tendencies and suburban political advocacy. By boldly questioning what is meant by normalcy and deviancy, Rodriguez calls into question our humanity, our sense of connectedness, indeed our lives.

Finally, Wulfhorst, Luloff, Albrecht & Lopez’ essay completes the thematic issue with an exciting discussion of economic development, environmental protection and rural Native American Indian identities. The mixed methods approach this study takes is important as they supplemented the administering of surveys with a few key-informant extended interviews. There were 127 surveys completed and the results indicated that many rural Indian inhabitants of the Fort Mojave Indian reservation near the Colorado river, felt excluded from the surrounding community and that feeling isolation had an effect on their identities. The respondents also reported perceptions of limited economic opportunity and limited institutional concern for environmental protection or an unpolluted environment. While their primary concern was for increased environmental protection, economic opportunity was a close second. The environmental threat being imposed on the Fort Mojave community stimulated “an unprecedented and cohesive fight for justice and social sustainability of their Indian community” (in this volume). The Fort Mojave residents indicated that they will not move from their community and so they will stand and fight for a natural and environmentally safe place to live. The cultural significance of the environment is symbolic of their connection to land and spirit. As one respondent is reported saying, “Since the 1950s, we rely on ourselves-for transportation, education, livelihood. Before, we relied on the creator-for crops, food, rain.” This is not to suggest that the Great Spirit is no longer important to their daily survival, but that community support is critical as identities are negotiated as some “ecological Indians” come in contact with western cultural ideals. It is only when the Great Spirit, the environment, and resources are aligned that community solidarity is at its best. Until then, the Fort Mojave Indian community remains intact, but troubled by factors that may ultimately threaten their survival, their social sustainability.

The essays in this volume are contributory to the literature in rural community psychology, communication, economics, international development, rural sociology, history and literature. The interdisciplinarity of this special issue is marked by a sophisticated blend of empirical research and theoretic conceptualizations of cultural identities. Truly, new ground is broken in this volume with cultural contracts theory being developed, the feasibility of rural support groups explored, and vocational rehabilitation of persons with disabilities being assessed. The special issue concludes with a nuanced mapping of school segregation and media reinforcement of racial separatism and finally, a triangulated examination of environmental protection, economic opportunity and perceptions of community identity. African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are among the most underprivileged rural inhabitants in the United States and this special issue explains why. Here is a unique compilation of original

essays that speaks directly about the immeasurable decline of resources to suffering communities and the resultant effects on their cultural identities. Although it appears unfortunate that the essays here actually prove that cultural communities in rural America are negotiating their cultural identities, the good news is that these communities are among the most cohesive and culturally connected communities in America. They have been confronted with challenges and threats to their survival, but they remain resolute and courageous. Remember, courage is not about having the strength to go on, but going on when you do not have the strength. This volume is a tribute to the courageous ones!

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