



The Importance of Rural Sociology

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Thank you!

Being named a Distinguished Rural Sociologist has special meaning to me. I feel fortunate that my research and its application have influenced the work of other professionals and have been recognized by several organizations. However, receiving this award from the Rural Sociological Society has special meaning, because this is where my career began and continues to have focus. Also, when I looked at the list of the 50 people who have previously received this award, it occurred to me that I was acquainted with all but 5 of those recipients. My memories of many of the earlier names on the list are especially vivid. Among them are rural sociologists who have had far more influence on Rural America than I have had, often accomplished in the face of consideration opposition because their scientific work questioned whether established public policies and the interests of powerful organizations were in the interests of rural people and places. Those rural sociologists were giants to me and others in my generation. They set the standard for doing rural social science, and I continue to greatly appreciate their work and influence.

The RSS was the first professional association that I joined in 1964, partly because of the influence of George Beal, one of those giants, and others at Iowa State University in the Beal-Bohlen Shop, as it was called in those days. I remember George telling new graduate students that if we could only belong to one association we should probably join the American Sociological Association, but if two could be afforded, the Rural Sociological Society was a wonderful organization that would support our interests and development. Soon afterwards, he and Joe Bohlen provided a paid RSS student membership to all of us first year students, and after attendance at one national meeting, my commitment to this organization was made.

Thank you, Jolene Smyth, for nominating me for this award and to anyone else who may have had something to do with it. I appreciate this return to roots, enormously. But, just in case any of you are doing the math and think this is retirement for me, my next study goes into the field in September, and I am looking forward to this one as much as any study I have ever done.

It is especially meaningful to be recognized at the same time as Steve Murdock, Director of the U.S. Census Bureau, who set the standard for making demography useful to policy-makers as the Texas State Demographer. I have valued enormously the exchanges we have had over the years. I continue to remind him that without survey people like me, he would not have any demographic data. His usual response is to remind me that demographers always get in the last word when the data are released. He has an entire session tomorrow to get in the last word, so I think I'll not challenge him to respond by commenting further. It is an honor to be recognized at the same time as Steve, and I look forward to our continuing the discussion of the importance of survey design vs. what happens with the data after it's collected!

It takes a community to produce a scientist

I am far from being the first to talk about the importance of community, especially in this profession that has done so much to help us understand this level of group influence on people that is critical for political leaders and makers of public policy to understand. However, just as an African Proverb articulated the belief that it takes a community to raise a child, a truth that Hillary Rodham Clinton brought to our attention more than a decade ago (1996), I believe it takes community, and perhaps multiple communities, to produce a scientist. This belief frames the comments I will make today.

The RSS is my second intellectual community—the first was the Beal-Bohlen shop at Iowa State University led in the early 1960's by George Beal, Joe Bohlen, Jerry Klonglan and Dick Warren. That is where this agronomist first encountered intellectual thought about how people influence other people. I still recall the lecture in my last undergraduate class taught by Joe Bohlen, when he introduced Ferdinand Tönnies' concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* and applied it to rural community. That was the day I felt like I began to understand what was different about many rural communities and made them function effectively. That lecture, plus knowing the work of alums of that shop,

such as Daryl Hobbs, Ron Powers, and Everett Rogers, led me to become a rural sociologist.

However, it was in the community of the Rural Sociological Society that I first encountered the stimulation of significant heterogeneity. It would have helped to be here in the 1960's to appreciate the diversity of issues discussed in these meetings. Status attainment research was big, demography and quality of life indicators research was also important and was emphasized, each by a number of different rural sociologists. Social action principles were a significant topic of inquiry. Adoption/diffusion work was the main area for farm and agricultural research, but papers were just as likely to focus on adopting civil defense fallout shelters and household appliances as agricultural practices. Very little attention was paid to the structure of agriculture and its many ramifications for people's lives.

At the RSS meetings I found that most people were interested in things quite different from the specific issues that I was working on as a graduate student, and that suggested to me that there was a lot more to rural sociology than we were doing in the Shop. I also learned that you do not have to be interested in everything, as long as you could find a few people with common interests, and that's what I found here. In retrospect, I concluded that the RSS was small enough to nurture young professionals like me, but large enough to innovate—the first task needs homogeneity and the second needs heterogeneity.

The nurturing part came from people like Bunny Willits who for some reason always saw fit to invite me to the Chinese dinner she organized at the meetings each year, and people like Keith Warner and Jim Copp, who would stop me in the hallway and ask what I was doing. That was pretty heady stuff for a young wannabe, and I still remember those conversations that made me feel like I was not an inconvenience to their personal space. And, had it not been for the combining of those two elements, I suspect this rural sociologist might have had a very short professional life.

Another part of trying to avoid a short professional life had much to do with George Beal's emphatic, but sometimes cryptic way, of telling me important things. One of them happened a week after I had finished my Ph.D. and was still on the shop payroll. He came into the shop and said, "*So, Dillman (pause), you think you are a political*

scientist." When George hesitated after the Dillman part that was the signal that I needed to listen with particular care; the reference to political science was because of it being my Ph.D. minor area. He continued, "*Why don't you round up others in the Shop and do a telephone survey to find out why the mayor's bond issue failed, and whether a second try will pass.*" I had never done a telephone survey, or even contemplated doing one, but that did not seem like the appropriate thing to tell George. I simply wrote the questionnaire like I would have for a personal interview (although without show cards), drew a sample of the Ames telephone directory, and handed out the questionnaire to the other students in the shop, and explained what George was asking us to do. When the results were in, I dutifully reported that a majority wanted the new city hall to be built. That was actually the wrong prediction, but by the time of the next vote, I had left Ames, and by now the statue of limitations on not yet being competent in the area of political polling has surely run out.

Neither George nor I had any idea that the next year in Pullman I would set up a telephone survey laboratory, and write the first book that provided step-by-step procedures for how to conduct telephone as well mail surveys (1978). George taught me the value of not being afraid to take on new things because of their not yet being the literature, and to think simultaneously about the theory of what we were doing with how to apply it.

The other piece of advice from George was just as important. When I was considering applying for a position at Washington State University in Pullman, I asked his opinion. The conversation went something like this:

Me: *Where is it?*

George: *In the middle of a wheat field.*

Me: *Oh, any forests around there?*

George: *Not as far as the eye can see.*

And then, after I had taken the job in the midst of those wonderful wheat fields, his parting comment to me was: "*Well Dillman (pause), I've always wanted to get someone out in Pullman, so don't fall flat on your face!*"

Over the years I have found myself giving similar advice to completing Ph.D.'s but have changed the wording a bit, to reflect the times, the technology, and expectations. I tell them, "Remember, you are only as good as your last six months!" For the last 45 years I have revised my vita

at least every six months just to be sure I am following my own advice, and in the spirit of this year's meeting theme on public sociology, I make sure that part of the vita gets updated as well.

The RSS is a place where innovation happens

At an annual meeting in the 1970's, several people (I believe that included either Jim Hildreth or Neil Schaller from the Farm Foundation) observed that all of us rural sociologists seemed to be studying community, demography, and so forth, but there was so little attention to agriculture. "Do you rural sociologists have anything relevant to say about what's happening to farms?" One of my memories from an annual conference in New York City was an informal session called for the explicit purpose of trying to get rural sociologists interested in agriculture. Based on trends of the last three decades at these meetings, I think that may have been a productive meeting.

The RSS in the 1970s was caught in the shadow of innovation/diffusion research, which many saw as corporate driven, if I can put it that way, and somehow the changing structure of agriculture just was not a significant focus. We had not yet begun to understand how dramatically food production and the structure of agriculture were changing. I continue to appreciate how the RSS was small enough and flexible enough then, as it is now, so that people can informally organize sessions with very little notice, and influence each other to develop new kinds of research.

The RSS and innovation in survey methods

Neither mail nor telephone was considered a legitimate survey method prior to the 1970's. But, as an assistant professor, long on ideas and short on money for doing surveys, I had to figure out something different. With advice from Walter Slocum (elected RSS president in 1976) and help from a new graduate student, Jim Christenson (RSS president 1986-1987) who probably taught his major professor more than I taught him, we tried to find ways of improving response rates and data quality, and were fairly successful.

Some of the stimulus for this work on survey methods and the way I eventually approached it came from others in the RSS, and particularly Tom Heberlein and Bob Baumgartner. I learned from them to appreciate the great value of different paradigms in stimulating new research. My

approach to survey design was to be a "manipulator," that is focus only on variables to manipulate in an effort to improve response rates. Tom and Bob did not approach the world in the same way. On this topic they tended to be "structuralists" and as a result also looked at how variables we could not usually manipulate impacted behavior: for example, who sponsors the research, who is being surveyed, and the salience of the survey topic. A journal article they wrote became a classic (Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978). That meta-analysis became a classic, and is one of the most cited articles on mail survey methods ever published. It seems so obvious now that both manipulation and structural cause of response are important, but for whatever reasons, I limited the original **Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method** (1978) to variables that we could manipulate.

To illustrate how unfortunately narrow my thinking was when I created it, the TDM was not originally the Total Design Method--it was the MSM, which stood for Maximal Systematic Manipulation. I still don't know how I let that happen! But, a kind editor (Eric Valentine) from Wiley, summed up the problem as concisely as George might have done, "*Dillman, you need to change that!*" So, I turned the subtitle of that book into a phrase that I think hit a resonant chord, on the importance of looking at all features of design that could influence response, from the wording of questions to that "*pressed blue ball point pen signature.*"

About the time these works were published, each of us presented papers in the same RSS session. That is when I realized that I was only studying half the problem. It was sort of a mini-confrontation of paradigms and methods of investigation. When I finally revised the TDM book 22 years later, the structural issue was a major consideration in the rewrite. I remain immensely appreciative of that intellectual encounter at the RSS, which is characteristic of many other such encounters that have happened, and continue to happen, in these meetings.

A lesson on public policy

Yesterday, we had a marvelous session on examples of public sociology that included discussion of how the work of many rural sociologists had to be done in climates of considerable opposition. Even methodologists face such challenges from time to time. Although the experience I am about to recount is hardly of the same magnitude as those encountered by some of you in this room, I found it

revealing of what can happen to methodologists doing work in the public arena.

In the 1990's I served as the first senior survey methodologist in the Office of the Director at the U.S. Census Bureau, where my charge was to provide leadership for redesigning the Decennial Census Data Collection procedures in a way that would improve mail-back response rates. I immediately focused part of my efforts on designing a respondent-friendly questionnaire, one of which was taken to a Congressional Hearing by the Director, Martha Riche. The form had the respondent-friendly visual characteristics that I was trying to introduce (1993), but contained several questions with wording that was, well, a bit obtuse. The chair of that committee (Congressman Sawyer from Kentucky), had previously asked the Census Bureau to prepare a postcard census form that could be delivered and retrieved by postal carriers. He noted that this multi-page form contained a lot of questions about this and that, and some more questions about other things, and could be much simpler. He finally exclaimed: "*Who designed this form, a pointy-headed academic with a Ph.D. in how to confuse people?*" I quickly concluded that form was not going to fly.

Another Lesson learned: the RSS cannot be easily pushed or shoved to do something that doesn't fit.

In 1983 when I was elected President of the RSS I came up with the idea that our name was too imprecise. The Rural Sociological Society could be mistaken for a local club, or at the other extreme be thought of as international. The obvious solution was to change our name, so I proposed that we consider becoming the American Rural Sociological Society. Bob Bealer quickly gave me a lesson in Old English by pointing out that putting an A in front of RSS was not a good idea! Consequently, that idea died a quick and merciful death. We are now discussing that topic again at these RSS meetings, and perhaps with the multi-disciplinary character that is so obvious here, this is the time to do it. I don't know whether changing our name is a good idea, but I have confidence that in due course the organization will figure out whether it is and act accordingly. For most of my career I have been convinced that we are much broader than sociology and perhaps it is appropriate to formally recognize our multi-disciplinary nature, which I believe is lacking in the work of too many social scientists.

A second lesson learned how quickly and how far this organization cannot be pushed came from another experience. In the early 1980's I was looking for something to do other than survey methodology, and became fascinated with information technologies, which I erroneously concluded (without reflecting appropriately on lessons learned from research following the adoption-diffusion paradigm) that they were going to immediately change the world. It seemed obvious to me that everyone else ought to see that as well, and as president (1983-1984) I came up with the meeting theme, "The Impact of Information technologies on Rural North America." (Dillman, 1985). I thought it was a great theme, and expected a lot of papers to come to the meeting on the topic. In the end, I suppose we had five or six papers on the topic, two that I invited and one of which was my presidential address. Since then, we have had a session or two most years on information technologies, but my ideas certainly did not instill a corporate takeover, nor should they have done that.

I continue to think it was the right topic for the right time, but definitely got some predictions wrong. I envisioned fairly accurately the end of charges for long distance calling. However, I totally missed the way it would happen. I could not imagine at the time that anyone would consider covering the countryside with cell phone towers every few miles. I also envisioned the rise of email and our dependence on it fairly clearly, and that in itself was a pretty heady idea since we were still mostly using typewriters as well as mail and phone to communicate. However, I completely missed the more important part of the information age, i.e. the Internet and how that would transform the world, not to mention how we now try to do surveys. The confusion of the times and our difficulty in seeing forward was summed up by a friend who observed that, "*I suspect you think the glass is half full of ideas, but it's still three-quarters empty, Dillman!*"

I presented about 35 talks in 25 states about the information age transformation, each an attempt to refine and expand the ideas as well as to encourage scientists and policy makers to use them. However, it was not until the late 1980's that an opportunity developed to study them empirically. That work originated with John Allen, and resulted in our discovering the persistence of rural community and community control phenomena in the community we studied, that I had not expected to be so pervasive. Although we did obtain impressive anecdotes, it became obvious to us that rural America was not yet

dominated by a computer on every tractor or in every home. Yet, the finding on how the particular community we studied became so much stronger because of combining the interests of village with countryside, as described by Charles Galpin nearly a century ago (Galpin, 1915) as a major rural problem, was especially satisfying (Allen and Dillman, 1994).

It would be another decade before the diffusion of these technologies would be sufficient for beginning to document a pervasive impact. This line of research with Mike Stern, led to our being able to document that information technologies were not mostly pulling people's interests away from local communities, but instead being used to foster and maintain community processes. In particular I remember Mike coming to these meetings a few years ago to present an intriguing paper that reported those findings. But, the follow-up discussion was even more memorable. The attendees that day responded by dissecting the paper in typical RSS fashion and offering helpful advice on reconstruction. I particularly remember Paul Eberts articulating the importance of the ideas in the paper, and suggesting how we should restructure the analysis. There is also a bit of Paul in a follow-up study that I put into the field this summer, and will do more work on this fall. To me, that session was the RSS at its best. An otherwise insignificant session, attended mostly by people with strong interests in information technology (there are still not enough of us at the RSS to get assigned to the big meeting rooms!) led to rethinking and the publication of a useful article (Stern and Dillman, 2006).

I have appreciated very much the RSS being a professional organization where one can bring partially developed ideas and be speculative at times. At other times we bring the real data, and can get help on that too. Speculation is often off base, but so important, and the informality of these meetings has been tremendously important for allowing the give and take that lets new hypotheses to be formed, while others quietly disappear. We all need these kinds of experiences throughout our careers. It took me awhile to realize that I could get as much or more from conversations and comments at RSS meetings than I would get from listening to formal papers.

The next big issues for study by rural sociologists

What a wonderful time for those of you just starting your careers. We have only been through Chapter 1 of the ethanol phenomenon and the potential consequences that seem as controversial as they may be huge. Four dollar gas may be the second Chapter, and I have no idea how that impact is going to play out. Will it lead to a changed population distribution and affect rural communities? Clearly, it is more than just an economic problem, with huge differential impacts on people. When prices change so dramatically, and people become convinced it's a real change, as I believe to be the case this year, then the stage is set for significant social change, which economic concepts alone cannot capture. As rural sociologists we need to be in the middle of the research so that the consequences for rural people and places will not be ignored. I hope that the content of next year's annual meeting in Madison will be filled with the best thinking of many you in this room, on how our nation needs to respond to this change. Are we now entering the post-SUV era? And, will it also be a post-air travel era, as we use information technologies to forge a virtual presence. I don't know, but gaining an understanding of these issues demands our best thinking. The potential consequences for rural people and the uses of rural space demands our attention, here as well as internationally, where the secondary effects of ethanol production methods appear to be more significant than the effects we now see in this country.

Only occasionally do we live through megachanges. And, the rest of the time we are often waiting for small changes to add up to something worth studying. One of these times of mega-change in my career was when some of us thought that "residential preferences" might reinvigorate rural America (Dillman, 1977). A second time was the farm crisis of the 1980's, when the huge and painful transformation hit rural America and contributed to a huge restructuring of where and how food is produced, as well as who lives in those rural spaces. The work of dozens of rural sociologists during this time, many of who are here today, was, in my opinion, rural sociology at its best. You showed to other scientists and to policy makers, how deeply people throughout rural America, and the nation were being affected by a crisis beyond their personal control.

The information technology developments of the 1990's that I invested in did not seem to cause as large a transformation as I expected in the 1990's, but now that the information infrastructure is avail-

able, and we have the twin towers of global warming and expensive oil added to the mix, significant consequences for commuting zones and the transporting of more digital information and fewer people, we may be on the verge of structural changes that will dwarf those we have seen in the past.

So, for the third time in my career, the potential for reorganizing the use of rural space seems ominous. If ever there were a need for rural sociologists, and our partners from other disciplines such as geography and the natural resource sciences, many of whom are here, to do what we do best, this is it. We need to study and understand what's about to happen, providing both the theory and far better data on how people are affected by energy use changes than I now read about each day in the Wall Street Journal, and other newspapers.

About Sample Surveys

I suspect you would be surprised if I did not mention sample surveys that have been the main focus of my intellectual work, and what I see as their enormous power for understanding rural America. Being able to survey a few hundred carefully sampled individuals, and make estimates of characteristics, behaviors, and opinions for several thousand or even hundreds of millions of people is as unique among our social science methods as it is powerful (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, In press).

Survey methodology also remains terribly important in our arsenal of research methods, and we have so much to learn about how to apply this method of collecting information. E-mail and the Internet have replaced the telephone as our prime conduit for communicating serious information including responses to surveys. However, the Internet is not yet ready for prime time. A lot of survey methodologists are working on it, and hopefully this situation will change. Our scientific understanding of rural people and places has much to lose if this work does not continue.

The year 2000 will be remembered as the year when we lost the Census Long Form that is used to establish the demographics of small rural places. In its place we must rely now on using sample data obtained via the American Community Survey, the result of surveying several hundred thousand people per year, and adding those numbers up over time. The issues are complex, and the greater frequency of data collection allows much greater precision in estimates for large populations,

which I applaud. However, the precision of statistical estimates and our confidence in them for population characteristics of small towns and counties will be significantly less than in the past.

I support this change from the Census long form to the American Community Survey. We need more timely data for the nation as a whole than we can get from the Decennial Census. However, the demise of the long form puts a greater expectation on rural sociologists and other social scientists who study rural issues to use sample survey methodology to replace the information we can no longer obtain. The Long Form was one of the last sources of data for getting precise estimates for rural places. Most national surveys only inform us on average about the characteristics of rural people and places and, to continue to build our science, we need more accurate information for specific rural locations.

If ever there were a time that primary data collection skills and sample survey methodology was needed in the RSS it is now. Each year at these meetings we have a session or two on methods. We also have a national experiment station committee that works year round to coordinate research to improve such methods (WERA 1010. Rural and Agricultural Surveys), but much more work is needed to maintain our ability to understand changes in rural places. Leadership for that committee includes RSS members Fred Lorenz, Glenn Israel, Courtney Flint, John Allen, Rob Robertson, and others. This committee is another example of how the RSS, with its diversity of interests and the ramifications outside our annual meeting, is making a difference in rural America. I hope that this might be a group that more of you with survey interests might consider joining.

Thanks to those of you who are the reason I am here today

Thank you again for this award, which I accept with great appreciation. Thanks to my former graduate students who have rural interests and who have "educated" me on more modern thinking and better analytic skills as I have tried to encourage them to think about some of these issues that I care about. Among them are: Jim Christenson, Annabel Kirschner, John Allen, Roberta Sangster, Todd Rockwood, Jolene Smyth, Kazumi Kondoh, Mike Stern, and Jessica Crowe, five of whom are here at this year's meeting.

Thanks also to the Shop—not just Jerry Klonglan, Dick Warren, Joe Bohlen, and George Beal—who guided us in productive directions during graduate school but also Rex Warland, Motoko Lee, Jerry Stockdale, John Tait, Herb Lingren, Paul Yarbrough, Walt Coward, Bill Fleishman, Chuck Mueller, Ted Lingren, Marjory Mortvedt, Joel Wright, and Merv Yetley. These are some of the fellow graduate students who helped me make the transition from agronomy to rural sociology, and I thank you.

Thanks also to the love of my life for the last 45 years, Joye Jolly Dillman, who regrets not being here today, and who remains the most skeptical but supportive reviewer of about everything I do, personally and professionally.

Finally, I want to say something about whether the RSS is a vital organization. It is about the same size as when I joined, but the annual meetings are bigger, the program is bigger and it is a far more exciting organization now with information age potential!

I do not remember a previous meeting with as many books available from our members on rural issues. Neither do I remember such a well attended plenary or one as provocative as that experienced yesterday by nearly 300 of us. The RSS is a much more vital organization than the one I joined. When I see efforts to support informed public policy, as now being done through Rural Realities, and walk through poster sessions as I did on Tuesday and see network and other analyses that our technology did not allow, even in the 1990's, I conclude there is something very exciting going on here.

As I have attended session this year a lot of the papers are on topics I know little about and am unlikely to pursue with my research; yet, that's exciting to me, because it's sessions like these from which I expect the next round of innovation to occur. Small groups of people, where young professionals encounter years of professional experience, seem like a productive mix. I also hear more perspectives being expressed in those papers that convince me we are about much more than rural sociology for the sake of other rural sociologists, which in this time of thinking about "public sociology" we should have as a focus.

When I became a rural sociology department chair in the early 1970's the director of one of

the regional research centers told me that rural sociology was a dying discipline, and that I should abandon a sinking ship. I wish he could be here in Manchester this month, some 30 years later. He would be surprised as well as impressed, I think. I'm optimistic about our future, and thank all of you, the founders and mentors I learned from in the past, and those of you who are much younger, and now the strength of the RSS. This has been a wonderful meeting.

Thank you again for the privilege of making these remarks today, and now, its time to get back to work on my next six months!

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