

**Farmers' Rural Community Attachment:
A Structural Symbolic Interactionist Explanation**

by
Forrest Lee Sanner

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A STRUCTURAL SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST EXPLANATION

BY

FORREST LEE SANNER

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my paternal and maternal grandparents. They are the children and grandchildren of those who homesteaded Rural America.

I respectfully dedicate this dissertation to:

Archie A. Sanner (1912-1967):

I often heard from others that you had a wonderful sense of humor and that was passed down to me through my father, your son, Archie C. Sanner. I also heard that you were very good to the grandchildren. I am very sorry that I did not get to know you. I miss you granddad.

Ida L. (Smith) Sanner (1921-2001):

You were a very hard working person who came from very humble beginnings. You had to sacrifice for your family. For that, I am grateful to you. I miss you grandma.

George Lloyd Fiferlick (1914-1964):

I see your love, compassion, and your spirit every time I look into my mother's dark brown eyes and into her beautiful face. You are alive in her and in me.

Ethel A. (Riley) Fiferlick (1918-):

Thank you very much for telling me about your life growing up on the farm. You are a very remarkable person. For all those nights that we stayed up late talking about your life on the homestead, you are the reason I became interested in rural life and culture. By sharing your life with me, I have learned a great deal. You have inspired me to write this dissertation about rural experiences and life. Grandma, I love you very much.

Abstract

FARMERS' RURAL COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT:
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FORREST LEE SANNER

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This research reconceptualizes or elaborates on, or even modifies, the systemic approach of community attachment by looking at its concepts from a structural symbolic interactionist approach. The systemic model conceptualizes community attachment as three forms of community solidarity--strong interpersonal relations among community residents, strong sentiments about the community, and involvement in community affairs. The structural symbolic interactionist approach assumes that farmers' role choices--involvement in community affairs--depends on their resident-identities. The nature of their resident-identities is dependent on how large their social networks are and on the character of those relations. For instance, if their resident-identities were limited to family concerns, their resident-identities usually reflected this. Indeed, four types of resident-identities were identified--family-orientation, local orientation, cosmopolitan orientation, and waning interest/disinterested. The structural symbolic interactionist model was tested on a sample of farmers and their spouses residing in five South Dakota

counties. Data were derived from two questionnaires and personal interviews.

Hypothesis testing found qualified support for the structural symbolic interactionist model. There was strong association between type of resident-identity (local orientation) and community involvement. As well, family-work conflict, sex, and employee identity were good predictors of the type of resident-identity. The extent of interpersonal relations and farmer identity were only weakly associated with resident-identity and community involvement.

Table of Contents

	Page
Acceptance Page.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Dedication Page.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	viii
List of Tables.....	xiii
List of Figures.....	xv
Chapter One. Research Problem.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Discussion of the Research Problem.....	2
Models of Community Attachment.....	2
Narrowing the Research Question.....	6
Further Discussion of the Research Question.....	7
The Past.....	7
New Times, New “Meanings,” Weaker Attachments.....	9
Farm Crises.....	10
Research Objectives.....	12
Significance of the Research Problem.....	12

Sociological Significance	13
Practical Significance	14
Organization of the Dissertation	14
Chapter Two. Literature Review	16
Introduction.....	16
Definitions of Community, Rural Community, and Community Attachment.....	17
Definitions of Community.....	17
Definitions of Rural Community	18
Definitions of Community Attachment.....	20
Measures of Community Attachment.....	24
Community Attachment as Residence.....	27
Factors Associated with Community Attachment	29
Sentiments Dimension.....	29
Interpersonal Dimension.....	32
Participation Dimension.....	32
Chapter Three. Theory	34
Introduction.....	34
Traditional Approach to Community Attachment.....	34
Structural Symbolic Interactionist Approach-Basics.....	36
Community Attachment Dimensions of Symbolic Interaction.....	36

A More Detailed Look at Off-Farm Employment.....	38
Self-Identity is Supported in Social Interaction.....	39
Agendas Support Identities.....	40
Self-Perceptions as a Member of a Community	42
Local vs Cosmopolitan Typologies	44
Model of Community Involvement	47
Summary	51
Chapter Four. Research Methods.....	52
Introduction.....	52
Theoretical Propositions and Hypotheses.....	53
Propositions.....	53
Hypotheses.....	53
Characteristics of the Population.....	54
Sampling Design and Data Collection Techniques.....	56
Operationalization of Variables.....	58
Validity and Reliability of Scales	64
Statistical Procedures	64
Summary	65
Chapter Five. Analysis of the Data	66
Introduction.....	66

Descriptive Statistics and Tests of the Research Hypotheses	66
Frequency Distributions	67
Test of the Research Hypotheses.....	71
Hypothesis One.....	72
Hypothesis Two.....	73
Hypothesis Three	75
Hypothesis Four.....	76
Hypothesis Five.....	77
Hypothesis Six.....	79
Hypothesis Seven	79
Hypothesis Eight.....	80
Hypothesis Nine.....	80
Hypothesis Ten.....	82
Hypothesis Eleven.....	83
Summary of Findings	83
Chapter Six. Summary and Conclusions	86
Introduction.....	86
Summary of Hypothesis Testing.....	87
Evaluation of the Theory	91
Discussion of the Research Hypotheses.....	93

Limitations of the Research Study.....	99
Practical Significance	100
Suggestions for Future Research	101
Summary	103
Bibliography.....	105
Appendix A. Farm Family Survey.....	116
Appendix B. Personal Interview Guide	121
Appendix C. Post-Interview Questionnaire.....	124

List of Tables

	Page
Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Resident-Identities Responses Collected from the Face-to-Face Interviews	68
Table 2. Frequency Distribution of the Number of Times Visited with Family and Friends Collected from the Farm Family Survey.....	69
Table 3. Number of Organizations that Farmers Participate in Collected from the Farm Family Survey	70
Table 4. Means and ANOVA for Times Visit with Family/Friends and Gender (Female and Male).....	73
Table 5. Scores by Resident-Identity Means of the Employee Identity Index	74
Table 6. Discriminant Analysis Predicting Waning/Disinterested and Employee Identity Index.....	74
Table 7. Means of Role Identity as Farmer by Resident-Identity.....	75
Table 8. Discriminant Analysis Predicting Waning/Disinterested and Role Identity as Farmer.....	75
Table 9. Means and ANOVA for the Number of Organizations and Resident-Identity.....	77

Table 10. Means of Number of Years Lived on the Farm by Resident-Identity	78
Table 11. Discriminant Analysis Predicting Involvement in the Number of Years Lived on the Farm and Resident-Identities	78
Table 12. Means of Family-Role Conflict by Waning/Disinterested in Community Affairs	79
Table 13. Discriminant Analysis Predicting Involvement in the Number of Years Lived on the Farm and Resident-Identities	80
Table 14. Means of Times Visiting with Family and Friends by Resident-Identity--Collapsed.....	81
Table 15. Discriminant Analysis Predicting Hours Visiting with Family and Friends and Resident-Identity--Collapsed	81
Table 16. Crosstabulation of Resident-Identity--Collapsed Data and Gender (Female and Male).....	82
Table 17. Means and ANOVA for the Number of Organizations and Gender (Female and Male).....	83
Table 18. Summary of the Findings	90

List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1. A Model of Community Involvement	48
Figure 2. An Empirical Model of Community Involvement.....	55
Figure 3. An Empirical Model of Community Involvement (with Coefficients).....	85

CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Introduction

Agriculture and its off spring, farming, have been in existence for many thousands of years. Early communities sprang forth from the systematic harvesting of the land. As farming increased, so did the complexities of farming and its relationship to communities. Agriculture and farming were no longer merely for subsistence, but for economic and social gain. A division of labor developed over time among the various farm families and the products they produced. The more products the farmers produced, the greater the generation of surplus. These surpluses enabled more people to survive and communities to grow. Markets were introduced in order for the farmers to trade and ultimately sell their goods for a profit. This basic system has continued until the present day with modern day complexities altering the agricultural community trajectory from local to world-wide markets (Lenski 1984).

The farming community nexus has seen many social and economic changes over the past few decades. Rural areas where these changes have been the greatest have experienced a decline in farms, a closing of rural public schools, overall population loss (Hofferth and Iceland 1998), and weakened community attachments (Brown, Xu, and Toth 1998). For instance, McCook County, South Dakota, experienced a 12% decline in farms from 1992 to 1997 (US Census of Agriculture 1997:227), and a decline in the

number of school districts by 20% since 1980. It is generally feared that changes like these have weakened the relationships farmers have with their friends and extended family, decreased their involvement in formal community organizations, weakened their overall sense of community belonging, and ultimately discouraged their interest in the community (Johnson, Lasley, and Kettner 1991). In concert with these structural changes, many recurrent farm financial crises have forced farm operators and their spouses to find employment off the farm (Deseran 1985). It is feared that this further erodes their community bonds and attachments (England and Albrecht 1984).

Discussion of the Research Problem

Models of Community Attachment

This research entertains the following general research question: Generally, what factors are associated with farm families' community attachments?

The literature defines community and community attachment in several ways, and the factors associated with farm families' attachments will, therefore, vary as well. The definitions are based primarily on the Wirth (linear) model, systemic model, and interactionist explanation of community attachment.

The Wirth model definition is the most traditional of the three. The Wirth model, called the linear model by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974), focuses on the effect of increases in population size and density (urbanism) on community attachment. Increases in population size and density weaken community attachment. Urban society results from

population increase, settlement density, and heterogeneity of the populace (Wirth 1938). A precursor to Wirth's definition was that of Toennies's (1957) *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society) typology, in which community, through urbanization and industrialization, changes from a communal experience into one based on formal associations (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). The linear model focuses on a macro or grand scale where societal conditions influence people's social behaviors. Individual or micro factors are de-emphasized.

In contrast to the linear model, Janowitz (1967) and later Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) supplied an alternate view of community attachment and called it the systemic model. Community attachment within the systemic model is based on the solidarity of the community's residents (Zhao 1996). Community attachment is defined as a person's affective and behavioral ties to the community (Mottaz 1989). People can be attached through many, intense relationships with others, through involvement in formal organizations and events, or through positive feelings about the community. Indeed, these three dimensions of attachment are sequential. Janowitz (1967) states that participation in these formal organizations is dependent upon sentiments, and these sentiments are dependent upon informal ties, "length of residence, position in the social structure, and the stage in the life cycle" (Goudy 1990:179). Janowitz (1967) and Goudy's (1990:179) discussion can be modeled by examining a person's length of residence in the community, his or her position in the social structure, and their stage in

the life cycle. These variables can greatly impact their feelings or sentiments they have for their community. This, in turn, could greatly affect their participation in the local community.

Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) identified three dimensions of community attachment. Sentiments are the positive feelings that people have toward their local community. Participation is defined as the involvement in formal community organizations and clubs. The interpersonal dimension is the relationship with friends and kin at the local level, which focuses upon how often people associate with one another and how intense their relations are with one another (Beggs, Hurlbert, and Haines 1996). Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) developed the systemic model in response to the failure of the Wirth model to explain differences in the degree of community attachment.

The third definition of community attachment is a response to the Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) model of community attachment, an interactionist approach. The interactionist approach to community attachment is based on how people construct their social lives through action, meanings, definitions, and interpretations of behavior, all of which are directed at an external social reality. The focus is on both the social structure and process (Stryker 1995). Stryker (1995) argues that one's role choices (e.g., involvement in community) ought to be explained by the strength of one's identities, especially as the resident-identity competes with other identities (e.g., farmer identity; employee identity). The identity that reigns over others (prominent identity) is

dependent on the number of people with whom one interacts pertaining to those identities, and the intensity of those interactions. In a nutshell, those with more interpersonal interactions with others in the community will have stronger resident identities and will be involved in more community organizations and events. Moore (1989) argues that farmers' values, especially the extent to which they accept the agrarian ideology, strengthen their farmer and resident identities. The strength of agrarian beliefs provides a set of referents by which farm families obtain their identity and attribute meaning to it. This sustains their salient identities. Salient identities are said to be situational. This is the identity that the individual enacts most often (Nelson 2001:45). The farmers' and their spouses' salient identity as "farmers" is based upon how they interpret their behaviors and how it structures their way of life. This, in turn, depends upon their agrarian beliefs, their self-perceptions, and self-expressions of their life's circumstances (Moore 1989).

Earlier researchers such as Hillery (1955) and later Kaufman (1959) agreed that community refers to "... social interaction within a geographical area and having one or more additional common ties" (Hillery 1955:111). Elements of this early interactionist approach hinged on the people involved in the community, associations or groups through which the interaction in the community takes place, and the different stages and phases of the interactions through time (Kaufman 1959:11). These elements of the early interactionist approach focused primarily on observable actions that individuals

performed in their local community. The observable actions consisted of community programs, events, activities, and projects. Examples include operating and maintaining the city park, organizing and implementing the annual school homecoming festivities, and planning and building a local community health care clinic (Kaufman 1959:11). All of these activities take place over a sustained period of time. These activities are of great interest to this researcher and this research project.

Narrowing the Research Question

The interactionist's definition of community attachment contains elements of the other two approaches. As worthy as the linear and systemic models are, they fail to perform what Macionis (1994:222) argues sociological explanations should do; they should account for the ways and reasons why people react to social forces. The interactionist approach does this when it focuses on competing self role-identities. Thus, the research question can be narrowed and considered from this approach.

Generally, what factors are associated with the resident-identities of farmers and their spouses? Specifically, do farmer and off-farm employment identities complement or compete with these resident-identities? Do the type and strength of resident-identities vary with such systemic variables as length of residence, position in the social structure, and the stage in the life cycle? Do resident-identities vary with the strength of interpersonal relations and involvement in community affairs, and, if so, how?

Further Discussion of the Research Question

Identities form and change as people act toward social forces. Thus, farmers' interpretations of social forces are crucial when considering their community attachments. Because "interpretation" is so important, more discussion here will better place the research question in its proper context.

Social forces and conditions are interpreted by people (Blumer 1969), farmers included. These individual farmers use their interpretations to develop and modify short-term and long-term goals and plans of action to meet these goals (McCall and Simmons 1978). In the past, strong¹ and weak² ties in the community were part of many farmers' "plans of action," which meant interacting in the community to meet their goals related to family farming. Many farmers today interpret agricultural forces and community involvement differently. For some, community involvements are no longer seen as meeting the goals of their farm families. Why this is so becomes clear once present conditions are compared to the past.

The Past. Traditionally, rural communities supplied and/or furnished the basic necessities of life for local town residents and the local farm families. Farm families would turn toward their local community to assist them in getting their needs met. These local, small communities provided social institutions that were used to meet farmers' needs. These social institutions consisted of governmental entities (Flora, Flora, Spears,

¹ Strong community ties refer to interpersonal relationships with friends and relatives.

² Weak community ties refer to relationships with associates.

Swanson, Lapping, and Weinberg 1992), churches, places of business, and schools (Galpin 1915; Flora, Flora, Spears, Swanson, Lapping, and Weinberg 1992; Salamon 1992). Even the purchasing of the local newspaper (Rothenbuhler, Miller, DeLaurell, and Ryu 1996) and home furnishings and apparel in the local community stores helped the local farm family meet its needs and goals. Farm families defined the community as a means of meeting their needs, resulting in the formation of strong community attachments (Miller, Schofield-Tomschin, and Kim 1998).

Once the community was defined as being important to meeting one's goals, the maintenance of the community became equally important. The process of maintaining the community is a form of community involvement. Community improvement projects (Rice and Miller 1999) and participation in civic groups such as the PTA (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974) are ways farm families became involved in the community beyond its mere economic function. For example, the rural community of Montrose, South Dakota, a few years ago wanted to keep softball and baseball local events; however, they had no adequate field on which to play. The town's residents and area farmers formed a joint plan of action to build a new field in order to provide the softball and baseball leagues with a place to play.

Another example of local community involvement was the community group. Community groups, such as high school booster clubs and high school reunion committees were formed in many rural areas. Booster clubs, usually consisting of town