

YOUTH OUTMIGRATION AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR RURAL CSAS

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INTRODUCTION

Why do youths choose to leave rural communities in the U.S.? This question is important in the context of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), because CSA farms could provide many needed benefits to rural communities and because CSA farms are labor-intensive and require able-bodied young workers. This research paper is an effort to understand not only why rural youths are moving to urban centers in such great numbers, but also the prospects for rural CSA farms.

Community Supported Agriculture Farms (CSAs)

CSAs across the nation have served urban and suburban shareholders for the past two decades (for a history of CSAs in the U.S., see McFadden, 2003; Groh & McFadden, 1997). CSAs have offered a great many benefits to shareholders in the form of fresh, safe, and local food sources. Many, if not most, CSAs are organic farms. CSA's claim to distinction is its unique relationship between farmer and consumer: farmers are far more accessible in this system than compared to grocery market shopping or other mainstream forms of consumption. Shareholders can share a close, friendly bond with the farmer, and may even assist with farm work from time to time (Hendersen and Van En, 1999). This close relationship ensures honest and healthful farming practices. For thousands of urban and suburban shareholders, CSAs have proven to be a superior form of food production, food consumption, and community networking.

CSAs and Rural Communities

CSAs have yet to take hold among rural citizens, although they are widely popular in urban and suburban locales. There is little research indicating the existence of CSAs that are both run by, and serve, rural people. This might be explained by the fact that rural people most in need of CSAs (the food insecure and the malnourished) cannot afford the high, seasonal cost of shares,

which can range from \$300 to \$1000. There are solutions to high share costs, however, and the real barrier to CSAs may be the social fragmentation and decline caused by recent economic upheaval in numerous rural communities. Many rural people may simply be too socially isolated, or jaded, to muster the community cohesion necessary for establishing a CSA. Nonetheless, rural CSAs should not be discounted, because they have the potential to palliate many social and economic difficulties rural communities currently face.

For one, many rural economies in the past few decades have moved from community subsistence activities, toward large-scale resource extraction, manufacture, and service sector employment (Weber, 1995). The resources, goods, and services are largely destined for urban consumption. This urban-centric economy has led rural communities to be dominated by a secondary labor market (Summers et. al, 1995), meaning the few jobs available are menial, low-paying, and hold little room for advancement or promotion. The Floras have shown women and minorities are most likely to hold these positions (2004). It is little wonder many young people are prone to reject the sparse and mostly demeaning opportunities available to them in their rural hometowns.

This economic trend has characterized hundreds of rural communities across the U.S. Rural communities are now poorer (USDA ERS, 2004), and as a result, at least 15 percent of rural people are food insecure (Berkes, 2006). A New Mexico food gap report, for example, has shown that rural people must travel *further* to access grocery stores that contain *less* selection of fresh foods at a *higher* price (New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council, 2006). CSAs have the ability to alleviate food insecurity by localizing the community food source. Local fresh foods would provide rural people with limited means access to affordable food and enable them to avoid processed, high calorie foods linked to health problems such as diabetes that are prone to flourish among low-income rural families (New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council, 2006).

In a more indirect way, CSAs can also strengthen faltering local economies. CSAs (and other local agriculture operations) bolster local economies by ensuring capital circulates within the community (Lyson, 2004), by preserving farmland (Brodt et. al, 2006), and by bringing small-scale farmers into a market from which they would otherwise be out-competed by large-scale industrial farms (Feenstra, 2002). Schumann explains local endeavors of this nature are essential to creating stable and sustainable communities (1998).

Thus, it is important to understand how CSAs can be implemented in rural communities. One essential part of this process is to explain why rural youths leave rural communities, not only because their physical labor is required, but also

because outmigration represents a loss of brain power, culture, and future economic prosperity (Gibbs & Cromartie, 1994) that makes any rural endeavor successful. Do youth leave for purely economic reasons, or do their underlying cultural values differ from their counterparts who have chosen to remain in rural communities?

This research paper is an effort to understand the above question by examining whether rural outmigrants value local knowledge more or less than people still living in rural communities.

Local Knowledge

What is local knowledge and how might it figure into rural outmigration? Kloppenber defines local knowledge as “derived from the direct experience of a labor process which is itself shaped and delimited by the distinctive characteristics of a particular place with a unique social and physical environment” (1991). In other words, local knowledge is gained through interaction at the local level, and is not knowledge that is universally meaningful or applicable. An example of local knowledge is a farmer whose soil varies across his or her farm. The farmer must have an intimate understanding of this variation in order to sow the appropriate crop in each type of soil to maximize crop quality and good stewardship. The farmer’s knowledge of his or her soil variation is not applicable to other farms; it is a specific type of knowledge that is valuable only in context.

Local knowledge is quite different (but not opposite) from Cartesian knowledge. Cartesian knowledge is the reductionist, binary thinking that currently dominates universities, laboratories, economic establishments, and other large-scale social institutions. Cartesian knowledge is concerned with universally applicable generalizations, such as the laws of gravity, economic analyses, or medical science (Kloppenber, 1991). Since advanced research institutions are predominately located in urban areas, and are the places to which many rural outmigrants aspire to work, it is necessary to understand whether rural outmigrants leave rural areas because they value Cartesian knowledge more than local knowledge.

It is also important to understand to what extent outmigrants and rural people value local knowledge, because CSAs are operated according to local, “place-based” knowledge, as Feenstra has labeled it (2002). Many CSAs are organic, and farming without pesticides or other chemical inputs is only possible with an intimate understanding of local biological and climatological conditions. However, many farms in the rural U.S. operate according to Cartesian principles embodied in conventional (chemical) agriculture (Hart, 1995). Do rural people

sufficiently appreciate local knowledge enough to make rural CSAs successful? Or has conventional farming in rural areas been more a matter of course than a moral inclination? Measuring appreciation for local knowledge is both a way to understand the causes of outmigration, as well as the potential for CSAs to succeed in rural areas.

METHODS

In order to understand the extent to which outmigrating youths value local knowledge, surveys were distributed to 32 urban college students aged 18 to 24 who self-identified as coming to New Mexico State University from rural communities across the nation. This group was targeted because Gibbs and Cromartie have shown 18 to 24 year old rural youths with one year of college education or more exhibit the highest rate (55 percent) of outmigration of any rural demographic (1994).

The 32 students were recruited by flyers, email, and word-of-mouth. Participants had the option of choosing to complete the survey in an hour-long focus group session where they could vocalize answers and discuss their responses in depth (4 students), to complete the survey electronically by email (18 students), or to take the survey home and return it in person (10 students).

Twenty-four rural residents of Torrance County, New Mexico, were also recruited for the study. Torrance is a nonmetro county, lying in the north-central region of the state. This group was recruited through the Torrance County Works Office, in association with the New Mexico State University Agricultural Cooperative Extension Service. The office serves as an employment resource for local residents, and many survey participants were unemployed and had not earned, or were in the process of working toward, a high school diploma.

The survey tested participants' appreciation for local knowledge by probing their awareness of their hometown's social and ecological features, and the usefulness and validity they attribute to this knowledge. Participants were asked to describe their knowledge of farming and/or ranching and then to describe the differences between acquisition of farming/ranching knowledge and acquisition of academic knowledge. Participants were additionally asked to describe their ideal career. A variety of career descriptors were offered that fell into two general categories: one category situated careers in the local economy and encapsulated local values and interests, while the second category described careers that champion globalization, multinational corporations, and a general disregard for local context.

Similarly, participants were asked to choose the three top hypothetical community figures they most closely identify with or admire. These figures were divided into those who would most value institutional knowledge (president of a national corporation, U.S. senator, physicist, international salesman) versus those who would be expected to value local knowledge (stay-at-home parent, town mayor, small business owner, small-scale farmer). It was hypothesized participants would adhere more strongly to one binary or the other, thus exhibiting the system of knowledge (Cartesian or local) the participant values most. The survey issued to rural participants differed only in the omission of questions requiring experience in a college setting.

Crosstabulation and chi-square analysis was then applied to the data to elicit dependent variables, using a probability value of 0.05. After crosstabulation, if the resulting significance value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis was rejected and the variables in question were considered dependent. In other words, the participant's respective cultural background could be said to play a role in his or her value for local knowledge if the variables were shown to be statistically dependent (having significance of less than 0.05).

RESULTS

Of the student participants, 62.5 percent were female. 21.9 percent identified as Hispanic, while 65.6 percent identified as White, and 12.5 percent as "Other." Similarly, 70.8 percent of rural participants were female, though fully 37.5 percent identified as Hispanic, the same percentage as Whites. One quarter of the rural participants identified as "Other." Despite these differences between groups and within groups, college students and rural people did not differ in their appreciation for local knowledge in most ways. There was no significant difference regarding participants' admiration for community figures, the extent to which they found farm work enjoyable, and their willingness to participate in community social life and volunteer activities.

However, there were two points at which rural people differed markedly from college students. For one, people living in rural areas perceived there to be more Cartesian knowledge-oriented jobs in their community than local knowledge-oriented jobs, while college students perceived there were fewer Cartesian jobs ($n=51$). The null hypothesis was rejected that the two variables were independent ($p=0.009$).

The most significant variable in the study evaluated whether participants thought a potential CSA would succeed in their community ($n=45$). (None of the participants identified an active CSA in their community at this time.) The null

hypothesis was rejected that the two variables were independent ($p=0.007$). In this case, only 41.7 percent of college students thought a CSA would succeed in their rural hometown while almost twice that proportion (80.9 percent) of rural people believed a CSA would succeed in the same circumstances. Rural people indicated they believed a CSA would succeed in their community due to the presence of interested local farmers, available farmland, and sufficient community interest. The college students believed a CSA would fail because these factors do not exist in their hometowns.

A final revealing outcome is that, of the college students who reported farming experience ($n=23$), 70 percent indicated they valued the knowledge they gained through farming (local knowledge) more than the knowledge they were in the process of gaining in college (Cartesian knowledge).

DISCUSSION

Rural residents and college students formerly from rural communities do not generally appear to differ in their appreciation for local knowledge. When the two groups do differ, however, they do so significantly. The marked difference in response regarding availability of Cartesian knowledge-oriented jobs, for example, indicates that college students and rural residents hold different views on the nature of the rural labor market. Rural people believe Cartesian knowledge-oriented jobs dominate rural employment opportunities, while students believe local knowledge-oriented jobs are more available. In this regard, rural people may have a greater awareness of their hometown's socioeconomic conditions than students, since Weber concurs that Cartesian jobs dominate the rural job market (1995). This perception on the part of rural people may have to do with the fact that the survey was conducted at a county office that helps area residents locate jobs and complete their GEDs, meaning that all rural participants in this survey either worked in an office (Cartesian) setting, or were unemployed.

This result may indicate rural people have an acuter sense of local conditions, and therefore, a greater appreciation for local knowledge. It could also indicate that college students romanticize, or generally misperceive, the rural places they leave behind. The fact that an overwhelming number of rural people believed CSAs would succeed in their community, while most college students did not, seems to reinforce this conclusion. None of the rural people surveyed had ever heard of CSAs before, much less belonged to one. Yet, when defined, rural people expressed both in the survey and vocally that they believed CSAs were a great idea, and could do much to alleviate the hunger and food shortages they themselves often face. In this case, rural people see the potential benefits of local knowledge in action, more so than students who have migrated out of rural areas.

Students' belief that a CSA would fail in their hometown may be attributable to the fact that, in enrolling in college, students must internalize institutional value for Cartesian knowledge. CSAs, on the other hand, operate according to local knowledge. Rural people at least see the possibility of CSAs succeeding in their community, and this could be due partly to their distance from the institutional/university mindset and a willingness to be open to any new possibilities that may improve local conditions.

On the other hand, 70 percent of students who had a background in farming and/or ranching found the knowledge they gained through those activities to be more useful than the Cartesian knowledge they were in the process of gaining through their college education. This may mean that some students retain conflicting feelings about the usefulness of local knowledge: they may appreciate it, but have little or no opportunity to apply this knowledge in their institutional setting. Nonetheless, college students from rural communities generally appear to value local knowledge and its potential for solving rural social and economic setbacks less than their counterparts still living in rural areas.

Interestingly, many rural people and college students chose not to answer all of the survey questions. None of the 56 surveys was returned fully completed. Several participants voiced comments to the effect that they were "unable to choose" between given options, and many even wrote on the survey itself that they favored both options of a given question, or none at all. While this is a drawback for statistical analysis, it could also be an indication that participants of both backgrounds mentally reject the binary oppositions and the reductionist, standardizing mentality of Cartesian knowledge.

These results point to two important conclusions. First, it appears youth may leave their rural hometowns due to a low level of appreciation for local knowledge. They may find urban institutions share their same Cartesian-oriented values, and choose to leave rural areas to join these urban occupations and mindset. However, I find that, while students differ dramatically on a few points, their appreciation for local knowledge appears to be generally the same as rural people when the survey data is interpreted as a whole. This means the high level of rural outmigration is probably motivated by limited employment opportunities for rural youth. Rural youth may move to urban areas because they rightly find the narrow range of menial, low-paying jobs available to them in rural areas to be demeaning and stifling. The 'respectability' of rural jobs is an important factor to consider in the context of outmigration, because, as Peden has shown, rural people's gender ideals and self-worth are measured through one's career choice (2005). Low-paying service or manufacture sector

jobs generally lack dignity due to their dead-end nature, and rural youth may seek respectable employment in urban centers.

Whatever the reason, there does not seem to be major underlying cultural differences between rural outmigrants and rural citizens that instigate the behavior and lifestyle choices of each.

Secondly, the survey results offer some clues to the potential success of rural CSAs. From the data, it is apparent that rural CSAs must be established by people still living in rural areas – and particularly by low-income or food insecure citizens who most sense the need and potential benefits of a rural CSA. It does not appear that students from rural areas could lead a CSA movement in their hometown as effectively as people who have continued to live in rural areas, as there seems to be vast difference in the community potential both groups see. It could be that students (who are financially secure enough to spend four years of their working lives in college) are removed from the food insecurity and other pressing needs that make the idea of a CSA immediately desirable.

These implications are a hopeful sign for rural communities. That rural people at least find rural CSAs to be a good and feasible idea means the first step toward establishing rural CSAs (community interest) is fulfilled. It will take a more complex solution to remedy the high levels of outmigration, and to keep needed young people at home. Though, rural CSAs could create more (and dignified) job opportunities for 18 to 24 year olds in rural communities. Of course, whether young people *want* to work on farms is a matter of personal choice, but the safer working conditions of organic farms, and the good company of fellow workers and shareholders can create an enjoyable working environment. Indeed, some rural youth, if given the opportunity, may find CSAs preferable to the daily grind of college or life behind a desk and computer.

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