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**Empowering Rural Sociology: Exploring and Linking
Alternative Paradigms in Theory and Methodology¹**

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ABSTRACT Theoretical and methodological approaches to rural social change are explored, especially those that give visibility to the range of heterogeneous experiences and perspectives that often are overlooked or ignored. Theoretical developments in postmodern, narrative, and feminist theory are described as are the methodological approaches they imply. Examples of research on rural social change that attempt to integrate theory and methods in ways that respect the complicated, processual nature of social life are discussed. They provide concrete illustrations of how alternative approaches can be fruitfully applied to some of the issues and problems rural sociologists typically study.

Introduction

Rural sociology historically has distinguished itself as a subdiscipline that is critical and forthcoming about its theoretical and methodological limitations (Bealer 1990; Copp 1972; Falk and Zhao 1989; Flinn 1982; Harper 1991; Newby 1980; Newby and Buttel 1980; Picou et al. 1990; Stokes and Miller 1985). For the most part, attention has focused on such deficiencies as methodological monism, abstracted empiricism, the atheoretical nature of much research, and the lack of theoretical diversity. For example, Busch and Lacy (1983) argued for alternative approaches to counter reductionist tendencies in agricultural science. Newby and Buttel (1980) stressed the importance of using critical theory in understanding the complex and contradictory nature of rural social change, and Bokemeier and Garkovich (1987) pressed for attention to gender differences within rural society.

More recently, Kloppenburg (1991, 1992) drew from such alternative epistemologies as constructivism, critical perspectives in the sociology of science, and feminist standpoint and cultural theories to illustrate the potential for engaging the heretofore subjugated knowledge of local farmers. He suggested that local knowledge is vital to the reconstruction of an alternative agriculture that gives

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credence and respect to the workable practices that already exist in the traditional repertoires of many farmers. While these critiques have been helpful in documenting the problems of the discipline, rural sociology has been slow to move in new directions.

To do so, it is necessary to both understand and deconstruct the ways that Western science, as a privileged and dominant epistemology, has narrowed the discourse by effectively excluding vital perspectives and angles of vision. This is not to say that one epistemology must be displaced with another. Rather, each must be recognized as partial and bounded in its own peculiar way. As Burke (1989) observed, every way of seeing is simultaneously a way of not seeing. Understanding the economic and social forces shaping rural areas requires a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. Combined ways of looking at social phenomenon afford the possibility of constructing a more complete picture of rural people and places.

In this essay, Kloppenburg's challenge is accepted by drawing upon recent developments in postmodern, narrative, and feminist theory to demonstrate how rural sociologists can begin to overcome some of the obstacles that prevent integrating theory and methods in ways that respect the complicated, processual nature of social life. Social, economic, and demographic forces are transforming life in rural areas at a pace that defies narrow approaches based largely on convention, institutional constraints, and publication requirements. Moreover, to the extent that rather glaring disjunctions between theory and methods are allowed, the risk of generating research that serves neither theoretical nor practical ends exists (Kaufman 1963). Therefore, such an undertaking is needed perhaps more than ever before.

Postmodernism: overview

Postmodernism shares important epistemological critiques of positivist science with feminism and concerns with linking understandings of social process to the embeddedness of peoples' experiences, as expressed through stories, with narrative theory. Postmodernism has had the greatest epistemological influence among the three and without a doubt boasts its share of enthusiastic critics across social science disciplines. Although scholars reproach postmodernism for its convoluted dispute with the basic tenets of modern social science, its impact within such disciplines as political science, geography, anthropology, and sociology has been incisive. Moreover, postmodernism no longer appears to be a temporary theoretical dalliance within the social sciences but a conceptual shift whose impact will be felt for some time to come.

"Post" in postmodern signifies the belief on the part of postmodernists that a definitive break or rupture with the historical period

called the modern era has occurred. Reactions to the idea of a rupture vary. Postmodernists celebrate it as a liberation from constraining and oppressive forces and conditions (Lyotard 1984) while critics are uneasy with the idea that a rupture and the concomitant loss of certainty, stability, and rationality really has occurred (Habermas 1987).

Essentially, postmodernists call attention to the disorientations that seem to be dissolving, dismembering, and fracturing identities and world views in an era of cataclysmic transformations that modernism did not anticipate. They argue, moreover, that modernity made promises and inspired false hopes for progress, wealth, and egalitarianism on which it did not deliver, at least to the extent predicted, and that unpredicted effects such as world wars, depressions, widening gaps between the rich and the poor, and environmental catastrophes are significant breaches of confidence as well.

Postmodernists argue that the unquestioned faith in progress inspired by modernism has succeeded in operating as a source of subjugation and oppression for many because it has functioned as an all-encompassing world view, metanarrative, or totalizing perspective. They argue that it also has spawned other metanarratives (e.g., capitalism, liberal democracy, Western science) that have succeeded in shaping and ordering the lives of people worldwide, often obscuring and co-opting the knowledge, realities, and small stories or micronarratives that people in their particular lifeworlds use to make sense of daily life (Foucault 1980).

Concerns among postmodernists about how the simultaneous valorization and subjugation of knowledge have come to be constituted historically were most notably popularized by Foucault (1970, 1973, 1978). These works examine how relations of domination are produced through the unequal empowerment of one kind of knowledge or way of knowing through the use of language and bureaucratic controls. This class of inquiry also has helped to raise questions about how such practices force speakers of marginalized knowledge to adopt the hegemonic world view of privileged knowledge if they wish to participate as full members of society.

In a similar vein sociologists such as Brown (1987), Lemert (1992), Richardson (1990), and Seidman and Wagner (1992) have used postmodernism to inspire a radically new cultural climate for understanding the processes by which knowledge about the social world comes to be constituted. They challenged arguments asserting that sociology is a foundational knowledge tradition. Moreover, they challenge the conventional epistemological assumptions and methodological procedures that represent sociological knowledge as a reflection of an exterior reality that need only be observed and recorded. Instead, they argued that sociology itself should be understood as a method of inquiry that has been shaped by the very social

relations it seeks to explain. From this perspective, these social relations are seen as reflecting particular experiences and angles of vision, not some generalized fixed reality.

Because postmodernists reject many of the conventional rules that come with carrying out social science inquiries, they have been accused of promoting an attitude of "anything goes." Postmodernists respond to this charge by arguing that traditional criteria, such as validity, reliability, and generalizability, cannot insure claims about the authenticity of research because they issue from epistemological canons that make unjustified assertions about their own authority in this regard (Rosenau 1992). Instead postmodern research attempts to decenter authority and claims about representing reality through research findings anchored to one set of criteria or another. Postmodernists argue that the authentic representation of any phenomenon is impossible and that the positivist ambitions of certainty and generalizability move investigators towards simplistic, homogenous determinations that accentuate sameness rather than difference. It is their argument with representative methodologies and their interest in highlighting difference that have given way to disjunctive methodological preferences—that is deconstructionism and intuitive interpretation (Rosenau 1992).

One of the major goals of deconstructionism is to expose the inadequacy of representational claims—to illuminate the paradoxes, ambivalences, and omissions constituting texts. In other words, texts, which can be official documents, stories, television shows, films, discussions, academic lectures, public speeches, or virtually any piece of recorded social activity, are thought to be rife with interpretive conundrums and therefore are incapable of being authentically represented. Unlike social science methodologies informed by positivist epistemologies that attempt to identify facts, truth, laws, and solutions, deconstructionism is interested in the contradictions, discontinuities, and blurred mythologies within certain texts that give way to numerous, interminable interpretations.

Foucault, for instance, employed archeological and genealogical analyses (i.e., deconstructive methods) in examinations of what he called the history of the present. He used these strategies to examine historical texts not for the history within texts *per se* but to gain an understanding of how the ideas and practices of particular eras came to constitute power/knowledge regimes or discourses. He examined discourses about sexuality and mental illness and pointed out that while these are reformulated into different expressions from time to time, they nevertheless relate forms of knowledge and power that rarely change. The need, he argued, is to examine texts not for their normative portrayals of reality but to trace the ways in which language, practices, and power configure and reconfigure at particular junctures in history and organize fields of visibilities (e.g.,

sanatoriums, mental hospitals) and regimes of truth (e.g., diagnostic practices, labels, treatments, rationales for incarceration) that orient thinking and acting with regard to certain phenomena.

Smith (1987) combined Foucaultian approaches and feminist approaches to create a methodology she calls institutional ethnography. She has used this approach to examine the emergence and impact of discourses about women and mental illness and on single mothers and the state. Escobar (1995) used similar approaches to examine the emergence of the development discourse after World War II that has, he argues, succeeded in "colonizing" thinking about the relationships between Western and non-Western people.

Agger (1989), Derrida (1981), and Marcus and Fischer (1986) offered approaches to textual deconstruction and literary criticism designed not so much to unmask untruth and error but to identify and re-situate hierarchies and dualities that appear to render texts unambiguous and certain. They sought to deflate the authoritative posture that gives texts their power. All told, deconstructive "methodologies" attempt to strip the appearances of normality and cohesion that disguise very particular and vested conceptions of the way things work in the world by describing how particular intersections of knowledge and power came to constitute them historically.

Less skeptical postmodernists—those willing to employ strategies other than deconstructionism—seek intuitive interpretation through the exploration of feelings, personal experiences, emotions, conflicts and contradictions, and intuitions and subjective judgements through strategies that bring them close to the particular life-worlds of those they seek to understand. In their desire to understand difference and complexity by centering the everyday worlds and experiences of the marginalized and ignored, methods such as life histories, oral histories, biographies, ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and visual sociology often are employed. However, even when using these approaches, scholars operating from a postmodern perspective do not produce the kind of objective, "sanitized," research reports usually found in sociology. In fact, even the concept of interpretation as understood within phenomenology and hermeneutics is very different. Unlike modern social science interpretive approaches that focus on analyzing text towards the end of locating patterns, postmodern intuitive interpretations are intertextual in the sense that they produce "... an endless conversation between the texts with no prospect of ever arriving at or being halted at an agreed upon point..." (Bauman 1990:427). Postmodernists argue that all texts are ultimately undecidable because there are an infinite number of interpretations and a multiplicity of readings that make it impossible or at least unwise to privilege one interpretation over the other.

This insistence on the intertextual nature of interpretation has given rise to inquiries that center upon narrative, especially the exchange of stories between researcher and informant about such things as home, community, and society. These narratives are treated as exemplars of the many stories that could be told about lives embedded in larger social and cultural contexts. This give and take between researcher and informant produces an ongoing conversation about power tensions and authorial issues, how particular narratives will come to be represented in written form, and for whom they will come to be written. In fact, these issues often constitute an integral part of the knowledge-base that informs the inquiry. Such research promotes the expression of those voices and experiences that have been discounted and ignored. Richardson (1990:134) argued that by providing a forum for the disenfranchised, sociologists can use their "... privileges and skills to empower the people we study...."

By opting to stress such criteria as emotionality, subjectivity, and feelings connected with the personal, local, and political dynamics of experience, postmodernists open the way to provide powerful points of departure from which to explore the dynamics of social change within respective localities. As Seidman (1991:136) suggested: "Instead of appealing to absolutist justifications, instead of constructing theoretical logics and epistemic casuistries to justify a conceptual strategy ... I propose that we be satisfied with local, pragmatic rationales for our conceptual approaches." Such a point of departure suggests that the flexibility, fluidity, and focus on the peculiarities of the personal/political intersections within particular localities accorded by postmodern conceptual schemes and methods offer opportunities to truly engage the incredibly complex social worlds that rural sociologists are poised to study.

Narrative theory: overview

Though narrative theory shares postmodernism's concerns with representation and discourse, it is more grounded in ontological concerns about the connections between story-telling and social action *per se*. It begins with the assumption that stories are a pervasive feature of human existence. Narratives are used to organize an individual's experience of time (Bridger 1994; Richardson 1990; Ricoeur 1984), to construct and maintain social groups (Charland 1987; Maines 1991), to guide socialization processes (Denzin 1988), to maintain control in organizations (Mumby 1987), and so forth. As these examples suggest, narratives can be conceptualized as social acts; they are an important part of the communicative processes used to construct the social world. Until recently, however, this relationship has been largely overlooked by social scientists because

stories are seen as epiphenomenal and hence not worthy of serious attention. This thinking obscures the fact that stories are interventions in the world and that they have material consequences (Charland 1987; Condit 1990). To see this, consider the debate currently surrounding welfare reform. While the case for welfare reform is often presented in the form of a logical argument in which statistics are cited to demonstrate how the system fosters dependency, a large part of the debate is based on stories, especially stories about welfare mothers who bear children for the sole purpose of increasing benefits. In situations such as this, anecdotes do matter because they bring ideology and emotion to bear on statistics and provide a rationale for action. To ignore this relationship is to miss the discursive processes which are inextricably linked to social change. Thus, it becomes sociologically important to explicate the relationship between stories and their consequences.

As a first step in sketching the broad contours of this relationship, it is necessary to define briefly what constitutes a narrative act. At a minimum, such an act is comprised of at least three elements: selecting events, which are simply occurrences or actions that can be referred to; utilizing these events in the construction of the plot, setting, and character; and arranging the selected events in a temporal sequence (Maines and Bridger 1992).

Although these elements are intertwined, plot is arguably the most important. When a sequence of events is placed within the framework of a plot, what Ricoeur (1984) calls *employment*, there occurs a transformation of what would otherwise be at most a chronicle. The plot binds the heterogeneous elements of a story and configures them into a temporal whole by combining two temporal dimensions: the chronological and the nonchronological. "The chronological dimension characterizes the story and shows that it is made of events along the line of time. The nonchronological dimension lifts events into a configuration so that, scattered though they may be, they form a significant whole" (Polkinghorne 1988: 131). Through the act of *employment*, events are placed in significant relationships to one another and lifted above the level of mere succession. This dialectical character of the plot—its ability to preserve linear time while simultaneously transcending it—creates a temporal gestalt that confers meanings on events. In and of itself, a single occurrence is not particularly meaningful; events take on meaning to the extent that they contribute to the development of the plot (Ricoeur 1984).

The connection between meaning and the act of *employment* suggests why narratives are a powerful social force: when stories are competently plotted, they can be engrossing and persuasive (Maines 1993). And, when particular stories become persuasive in the public realm, they can produce changes in the public vocabulary,

"... thus altering both a community's discursive and material practices" (Lucaites and Condit 1990:8). In the example of welfare discourse, for instance, poor mothers, who were once characterized publicly as victims, have been recharacterized as a class of social parasites. This was accomplished through the intentional displacement of one narrative by another. When many of the social welfare programs now under scrutiny were first enacted, they were justified on the basis of a story that emphasized the plight of the poor in a nation of great wealth. Such a nation, according to advocates of the poor, had a moral responsibility to protect less fortunate citizens. To many this is no longer a legitimate narrative. It has been replaced by one whose plot links the failure of "The Great Society" and liberalism in general to moral decay and the breakdown of the American family. Lazy mothers who produce offspring as a means of gaining a bigger share of a "too generous" welfare system are simply the logical outcome of this process.

As this story and its characterization of welfare mothers gains legitimacy, it comes to stand for the reality it purports to describe. In this sense, social and material conditions are not different from the story that is told about them. The vast majority of Americans have little if any contact with welfare recipients. Their understanding of these people's lives depends almost entirely on the stories they read or hear. As the story of failed liberalism comes to be taken as true, it likely will have the practical effect of truncating public discourse and legitimizing certain lines of action. Moreover, this story has so charged the welfare mother characterization with rhetorical resonance (Lucaites and Condit 1990) that when the term is used in the course of conversation or debate, its meaning is taken for granted. In fact, the characterization functions as a kind of concise summary of the narrative. The narrative then recedes into what Jameson (1981) calls the political unconscious, thereby further limiting the acceptable boundaries of discourse and action.

The importance of this discussion is not so much to illuminate the particulars of the welfare debate as to describe one of the ways in which narratives are used to promote particular versions of reality that favor particular groups or classes. Ordinarily, stories are not thought of in rhetorical and political terms. However, it is precisely because the ability to tell and understand stories is so deeply ingrained in consciousness and so much a part of everyday communication that they are such an effective means of persuasion in the political realm.

Although there are numerous methodological techniques for analyzing narrative, including structural analysis (Agar and Hobbs 1982), conversation analysis (Potter and Reicher 1987), content analysis, and depth hermeneutics (Thompson 1990), this focus on narratives as social acts directs attention to a methodological ap-

proach that draws on rhetorical criticism and emphasizes the construction, uses, and consequences of narratives. Moreover, because a rhetorical approach typically entails analysis of discourse over a substantial period of time, it is particularly well-suited to understanding processes of social change.

The task of interpreting narrative data is hermeneutic (Condit 1990; Kocklemans 1975). Understanding a narrative depends on an understanding of its parts; at the same time, the parts only make sense in light of the whole. Moreover, specific narratives often are nested within large narrative structures and these must be considered when analyzing a particular narrative. Finally, narratives are not constructed or interpreted in a social and material vacuum. Failure to pay attention to standard demographic and economic variables results in a decontextualized interpretation which, while it may be interesting, is not likely to be theoretically or practically useful.

By focusing on the ways in which different definitions of a situation are cast and deployed in narrative form, the narrative approach provides a means of linking discourse to social change and vice versa. Moreover, the emphasis on narrative is compatible with the standard emphasis on structural variables. This feature makes it particularly well-suited to examining the link between structure and agency in rural areas.

Feminist theory: overview

Feminist theory, like postmodern theory, also challenges conventional interpretations of science and society by striving to understand different ways of viewing the world and the complex identities upon which these views are based according to gender, race, class, region, ethnicity, and sexuality. However, while more feminists are embracing aspects of postmodernism, many feminists actively reject it largely because of its failure to further a political agenda. Unlike postmodern theory, feminist theory focuses primarily on explaining the subordination of women. Towards this end, narrative approaches often are employed to access the heterogeneous conceptualizations of oppression and their impacts on women's lives.

A strategic starting point would be to examine positivists' expectations that scientific knowledge is objective and, thus, universal. Feminists generally argue that dominant social science epistemology emerges from and actually serves the purposes of the privileged social classes and primarily serves the interests of men. They argue that women have been excluded from defining what counts as knowledge and that questions in various fields have rarely been asked from women's perspectives. In recognizing this situation, feminists join other critics of positivism in asking questions of conventional epistemology: Can there actually be value-free, objective knowledge?

Who are the subjects and agents of knowledge? What is the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge? Responding to these questions, feminists offer several competing epistemologies listed here in the order of their evolution: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism (Harding, 1991).

Feminist empiricism attempts to eliminate sexist biases in research by exposing androcentric biases in scientific research. Much of the early feminist work in rural sociology (Bokemeier and Tickamyer 1985; Tickamyer and Bokemeier 1988) proceeded like that. However, many scholars working in this tradition soon understood that employing scientific methods more rigorously failed to significantly shift research questions to more adequately explain women's situations. Following such research trajectories, many feminist theorists of knowledge recognized that women's experiences differed from men's and that scholarship should begin from the daily life experiences of women. Such a reconceptualization of women's experiences simultaneously defies the assumption that women and men possess the same sociocultural system of meaning and exposes male bias in sociological theories and research.

Feminist standpoint theorists suggest that women have particular standpoints (Smith 1987) or angles of vision (Collins 1991); because of women's subordination to men, however, their standpoints remain subjugated and unheard. Standpoint theory examines how the context of women's lives situates them in different positions than men for understanding and changing the world. For example, Haraway's (1991) concept of situated knowledge provides an avenue for understanding multiple perspectives and the experiences of rural women. While some rural sociologists have examined race (Jensen and Tienda 1989; Snipp et al. 1993), ethnicity (Salamon 1985), and class (Goss et al. 1980), perhaps with the exception of class issues findings from these studies are not central to the general theories of rural society. Feminist attempts to include multiple perspectives and identities of women from different races, regions, ethnicities, classes, and sexualities also can prove useful for rural sociologists.

Feminist standpoint theorists also argue that women's standpoints are privileged and offer emancipatory possibilities for transforming gender relations. One common unifying theme that has emerged among feminist scholars is women's modes of resistance to their subjugation by males. They focus on what women know about those who attempt to disempower them and how they compromise, accommodate, and defy those individuals who represent the male system. In her writing about African-American women, Collins (1991) stated that women have developed a dual consciousness, enabling them to deal with their "other" status in the white male world. This consciousness contains knowledge about the oppressor common to all women and knowledge about the self. The very separate nature

of the two types of knowledge sustains women in the face of dominant forces. Investigations of this duality could be used to inform the agendas of women's political activism in all spheres of their lives including social science and the production of legitimate knowledge.

However, much debate has ensued concerning what if anything comprises the particular life experiences that women share, just as feminists avoid using the falsely universalistic practices of positivism, they also strive to understand the diversity of women's voices. In fact, some feminist theorists embrace the turn towards postmodernism, critiquing earlier feminists for falling into the trap of "essentializing" women. Recently, Haraway (1991) questioned the necessity of delineating one feminist standpoint. Her work suggests that knowledge claims are derived from situated, located positions; that is, there are multiple standpoints and positions, not a singular feminist standpoint. For example, Collins (1991) argued that black women cannot separate their experiences of being women from being black. Anzaldúa (1990) indicated how the hybrid, multiple identities and experiences of women of color force them to survive by developing flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and divergent thinking. In a similar vein, lesbian theorists such as Allison (1994) challenge heterosexual assumptions in feminist theory and call for attention to the particular experiences of lesbians. Butler (1990) went even further to question the very stability of the categories of sex and gender. All of these turns broaden feminist analysis to include and recognize the multiple perspectives of women and to provide more complex and deeper pictures of women's lives.

Shifts in feminist epistemologies also compel feminist social scientists to continually reshape their methodology. The issues raised by recent work on feminist epistemology have implications for studies of rural women in terms of their life experiences, their differences, and their resistance to male dominance or institutions in rural society. As in sociology, most rural sociologists generally use theories developed from men's perspectives in which women are defined in terms of men's activities. Otherwise, rural sociologists often have confined their investigation of gendered issues to the use of gender as a variable. Recently, some studies have used feminist theory and corresponding methodologies to demonstrate how rural women's experiences differ substantially from men's. While feminist methodological approaches vary widely, three key aspects will be discussed by continuing the critique of positivism, noting different investigations of women's experiences, and concluding with ways to pursue an action agenda.

The tenets of feminist method stand in sharp contrast to traditional social science methods. Feminist epistemological goals veer from the search for universal truth, thereby leading to a critique of

positivist research methods that include claims to objectivity, value neutrality, and sole reliance on statistics and quantitative methods. Feminist social scientists claim that reliance on statistics and quantitative methods as the privileged way to describe the world limits our understanding of women's lives.

Central to feminist methodology is the approach of beginning with women's experiences as the starting point for analysis. Smith (1987) emphasized how sociological work overlooks women's everyday experiences and how men's categories traditionally have defined research problems and approaches. For women scholars, "... the challenge to begin with our own experiences arose out of the frustration at the realization that women's lives, their history, their struggles, their ideas constitute no part of dominant science" (Mies 1991: 66). By understanding women's daily lives, scholars are better positioned to interpret social life more fully. An important aspect of this approach involves seriously considering emotions and feelings as well as reason. Stanley and Wise (1983) noted that both the researcher and the research subject's emotions are relevant.

While not arguing against the usefulness of statistics, feminist methodologists have employed oral histories, ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and other data-gathering techniques. Most often they have used semistructured or unstructured interviews. These techniques are a departure from the survey interview because they allow for a guided conversation with the opportunity for clarification and relatively free interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Reinharz 1992). Thus, avoiding the standardization of response and ultimate control over the research participant characteristic of positivistic techniques, the relationship between the interviewer and research participant becomes more egalitarian. Moreover, the data gathered reveal a rich diversity of understanding unattainable via dominant research approaches.

Feminist methodological approaches have become increasingly reflexive, recognizing the limitations of qualitative as well as quantitative research. Many researchers focus on the nature of the relationship between the researcher and those they are researching. Attempts to empower research participants may be problematic. By rejecting the relations between researcher as subject and researched as object, feminist scholars call for a participatory, empowering approach to research. By building on Marxist and critical theory, feminist researchers pursue an explicitly political agenda for improving women's lives, thus directly confronting scientific claims of value neutrality.

The work of many feminist researchers appears biased from the positivist perspective. Rather than claiming an objective, value-free stance, feminist researchers emphasize subjective reality and explicitly support political agendas for improving women's lives. However,

their willingness to explicitly focus on the political nature of their research can be instructive to rural sociologists, many of whom work to improve rural communities and rural people's well-being. Rather than drawing a strict line between action and research, feminists see their research problems and methods as connected to social change. Important similarities exist between feminist methods and participatory action research strategies, as suggested by Chambers (1984) and others. In sum, feminist methods are consistent with recent sociological attention to people's agency and their potential to change their lives.

Alternative approaches to rural development

Postmodern, narrative, and feminist approaches hold particular promise by providing new angles of vision on the dynamics of rural social change. Moreover, when combined with more conventional approaches, postmodern, narrative, and feminist approaches offer rich opportunities for linking levels of analysis and producing detailed representations of social worlds. Rural development will be used as an example to illustrate how these three frameworks and the research strategies they suggest can be woven together to improve understanding of rural life.

Most approaches to rural development stress job creation and economic growth. The underlying assumption is that rural areas lag behind their urban and suburban counterparts on a variety of social and economic indicators and that strategies that foster economic growth will gradually improve the well-being of rural people and communities. Much of the scholarship on rural development is firmly rooted in the market paradigm supporting government policies and private sector activities that encourage business investment in rural areas. Research has focused on several questions: Should rural development efforts be sectoral or regional? What are the local and extra-local factors that inhibit and/or promote rural development? What is the relationship between agriculture and rural economic well-being? How are rural areas affected by federal agricultural policies? However, despite decades of research from a variety of theoretical perspectives including human ecology, internal colonialism, uneven development, world systems theory, and neoclassical economics, the failure of many rural areas to develop and the social and economic dynamics involved in this process remain poorly understood. Indeed, the project recently completed by the Rural Sociological Society Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty (1993) gave dramatic testimony to the complexity, intensity, and variety of social, political, and economic changes occurring across rural America. Linear, one-dimensional discourses currently shaping rural development would seem ill-prepared to engage these complexities.

A postmodern approach to rural development deconstructs the concept of rural development. Theorists addressing development in the Third World such as Escobar (1995) and Sachs (1992) have led the way in deconstructing this concept. Following this approach, rural development is an historically produced discourse that orders thoughts, research, and actions concerning rural people and places.

Current discourse portrays rural people and places as "unfinished" vis-a-vis urban people and places. The scholarly discourse on rural development assumes that rural people have an endless list of problems, such as poverty, poor schools, inadequate health care, and poor job opportunities, that can be solved through economic development or modernization. Rural places are viewed as backward and development is posed as the only solution. Postmodernists emphasize that development has not delivered on its promises of sustained economic and social well-being and that in the process of revamping local institutions and sources of livelihood it has undermined the ability of rural areas "... to secure well-being without joining unconditionally the economic race" (Sachs 1995:430). Rural development policies from this perspective have pitted rural people and communities against one another for forms of economic activity that are disdained by more affluent areas. Moreover, integration of rural areas into the global economic system has dangerously reduced the room to maneuver in times of economic uncertainty (Sachs 1995). Finally, postmodernists argue that the development discourse has silenced the voices and cultures of rural people, defining their knowledge, practices, and experiences as impediments to economic growth rather than as resources that could be drawn on to simultaneously foster economic and social well-being while preserving valued ways of life.

As Escobar (1995) realized, deconstructing the development discourse is not particularly useful unless it is accompanied by approaches that reconstruct and produce new ways of thinking and acting. Narrative and feminist frameworks may lead rural sociologists in these directions. A narrative approach, for instance, may attempt to explain the developmental trajectory of a place by examining the ways in which local history shapes debate and action. This line of reasoning assumes that communities are defined in large part by the stories people tell about them. Indeed, as Johnstone (1990:16) wrote, "[c]oining to know a place means coming to know its stories; new cities and neighborhoods do not resonate the way familiar ones do until they have stories to tell." The story of Detroit, for instance, revolves around the rise and fall of the automobile industry. Of course there are other stories that can be told about Detroit, but for many people this one captures the city's essence. It is through the telling, hearing, and reading of stories such as this that a sense of familiarity is gained and a common basis

exists for talking about particular places and the people who inhabit them (Johnstone 1990).

Such broad, sweeping renditions of a community's history constitute a type of narrative that for want of a better term can be called a heritage narrative (Maines and Bridget 1992). These are selective representations of the past that feed into and are partially driven by the demands, sentiments, and interests of those in the present. Hence, they often play a defining role in determining local development strategies. Heritage narratives give temporal persistence to communities by providing an account of the community's origins, the character of its people (both past and present), and its trials and triumphs over time. The stories told about how communities came to assume their present form provide an overarching framework within which the meaning of contemporary events can be placed. The community, in this sense, "... is not different from the story that is told about it; it ... is constituted by a story of the community, of what it is and what it is doing, which is told, acted out, and received in a kind of self-reflective narration" (Carr 1986: 149-50).

The notion that heritage narratives are central to the temporal persistence of communities points to another important feature; they are a form of constitutive rhetoric. Heritage narratives create an audience to whom appeals can be made. To be specific, they position audiences by identifying those in the present with real or imagined forebears who can be depicted as a unique group (Charland 1987). When this process of identification is successful, individuals are more likely to think of themselves as temporally persisting collective agents with a history and a common identity.

Paradoxically, heritage narratives are powerful precisely because they do not appear to be rhetorical. After all, they simply recount the history of a community and its people. They can, however, be put to rhetorical use. In fact, when heritage narratives are particularly well-known and/or effectively mobilized, they can have a decisive effect on the content and direction of public discourse and, consequently, public action.

Lofland (1991) described this process in her discussion of land-use planning in Davis, California. Davis has a population of 50,000; in the dominant heritage narrative, however, Davis remains a small, friendly agricultural community peopled by residents in single-family dwellings on large lots. This is simply the way Davis has always been, at least according to the story residents tell themselves. Within this narrative structure, high-density development is anathema; the only development proposals viewed favorably by the public and decision-makers are those that are low in density. The scale of development is a secondary if not irrelevant concern. "And the ironic consequence of this for the form of a growing Davis is predictable:

sprawl" (Lofland 1991:214). In short, planning efforts are constrained by this heritage narrative in such a way that they result in a pattern of growth that is "... neither small in population nor in area" (Lofland 1991:214).

As this case demonstrates, heritage narratives are never politically neutral. They usually position audiences to support lines of action that result in an inequitable distribution of costs and benefits. In Davis, for instance, large-lot zoning undoubtedly impacts most negatively on the poor, first-time homebuyers, single-parent households, and others who cannot afford a single-family home. There is rarely, if ever, a single heritage narrative in existence at a particular time, of course. One may be dominant but others usually exist. These other narratives can be used to create new audiences that will favor different lines of action. Again, Davis is an instructive example. In addition to the small-town narrative, there is an emerging heritage narrative in which Davis and its residents are at the forefront of efforts to conserve energy (Lofland 1991; Lofland and Lofland 1987). As this narrative gains adherents, one might expect to see a shift to such energy-efficient uses of land as cluster developments that also result in more affordable housing.

In approaching rural development, feminist theory asks: What are the implications of rural development for women's and men's lives? To what extent are the standpoints of women considered in rural development research and policy? In the United States, rural development policy has failed to address the role of women in the rural economy (Tickamyer et al. 1993). Specifically, researchers often have failed to recognize and address the gendered nature of economic relationships that work to women's disadvantage. For example, all rural residents suffer from a lack of employment opportunities. However, rural women are particularly vulnerable to underemployment and unemployment due to traditional attitudes, familial demands on their time and energy, and occupational and job-level discrimination in hiring and promotion.

Rural development efforts that attract industries or promote tourism are seldom considered from the perspective of gender. Research documenting rural women's increasing participation in the labor force and in the informal economy seldom has been incorporated into rural development planning or research agendas. Recent work by Gringeri (1993) and Naples (1991) reveals how attraction of industries to rural areas relies heavily on the availability of women's labor and alters gender and social relations in rural places.

Feminist frameworks examine whether rural people are the subjects or objects of research and reflect on how relations with the people under study define the findings. Feminist methods focus on giving voice to women's subjugated knowledge. For example, Mooney (1988) critiqued studies that intend to improve the lives of

Third World women but actually portray these women as victims, illiterate and unable to speak or act for themselves. In response to Mooney's critique, feminist researchers are struggling to have these women speak for themselves while simultaneously recognizing that academic worlds are often alienating to rural women. How can marginalized voices be heard? Rural sociologists might ask several questions. What are the relationships between researchers and their subjects? How do these relations affect research problems, results, and interpretations of findings? Are rural people portrayed as victims or as agents struggling to speak and act on their own behalf? Use of certain methods suggested by feminist epistemologies give women a voice useful in understanding their experiences.

Conclusions

Postmodern, narrative, and feminist theories share epistemological and methodological assumptions that reflect a significant distancing from the suppositions of positivist science.² Each is concerned with centering the everyday lived experiences of people over illuminating general principles and each gives significance to the intersecting contingencies of language, self, and community that prevent the objective detachment of researcher from research participant. Often postmodern, narrative, and feminist theories are deployed by scholars in the form of blurred genres. For example, feminist postmodernists might employ the rhetorical tools offered by narrative theory to conduct a feminist intertextual deconstruction of the diaries of African-American women at the turn of the century in order to observe how the contradictions within or between narratives illuminate the effects of the intersections of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism.

Of the three frameworks, postmodernism proffers the strongest epistemological orientation by calling into question what it considers distinctly modern forms of representation and power that have served to occlude and diminish vital epistemological, social, economic, and political forces. While narrative theory shares postmodernism's concern with the forms of representation that have come to prevail in modern social science approaches and their impacts on action and thought, its ontological orientation affirming storytelling as the central means by which order is given to the social world is what gives it distinction. Feminist theory intersects with and accommodates many dimensions of both postmodern and narrative theory but distinguishes itself by expressing an explicitly emancipatory agenda for women and other oppressed groups.

² There also are striking differences and quarrels among these frameworks that are difficult to treat within the limits of this article. Much of the literature cited would provide useful introductions in this regard.

Rural sociologists are encouraged to broaden their epistemological discourses and link them in meaningful dialogue to methodologies that provide deeper and more useful understandings of the complexities of rural social change. Those less familiar with these frameworks are invited to explore the possibilities they may offer for their research.

These theoretical and methodological developments are particularly useful for examining the strengths and weaknesses of more conventional epistemological and methodological frameworks. Postmodernism reveals the contradictions and power-laden nature of dominant discourse and creates a space for marginalized peoples' voices to be heard. However, like most theoretical perspectives, postmodernism provides only a partial view of the world. In fact, when deconstructive practices are pushed to an extreme, nihilism is often the result. To move us beyond this impasse, narrative and feminist frameworks are suggested as means of illuminating social practices and processes. Both of these approaches provide the tools to represent the complexity of rural people and places. While much work needs to be done in this area, the lines of inquiry opened by feminist and narrative approaches hold promise for generating the kind of knowledge necessary to inform policies that more fully benefit the people for whom they are intended.

These approaches also could be applied to other areas of investigation, including the sociology of work, grassroots movements, sociology of agriculture, and environmental sociology. Not only would such an undertaking supplement existing research, it would suggest new questions and approach old ones from new vantage points. These are precisely the kinds of steps needed to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

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A Technological Science Perspective for Sociology¹

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ABSTRACT The traditional positivist model is an inadequate foundation for sociology as a science. The phenomena of society differ from the phenomena assumed by positivism and existing in the world of nature in ways that prevent the successful use of that traditional approach. Agency, the ability to choose among alternatives where the choice makes an important difference, exists in social phenomena but has no counterpart in nature and cannot be dealt with adequately by positivism. A technological science perspective is suggested as an alternative for a science of sociology that can deal with the reality and importance of agency. Eight differences between the traditional perspective and the alternative are sketched. The alternative requires changes in the kind of generalized knowledge produced and the way it is produced, accumulated, and refined. The changes, though seemingly small, would produce a major reconstruction of much of sociology; such changes could result in important progress by the field of sociology.

Introduction

As sociology enters its second century in America, a swelling chorus of voices raises fundamental questions and proposes diverse answers about the discipline and the vital issues of the day. Whose questions and what answers can be trusted? How can disagreements about the discipline and its issues be resolved? The public, decision-makers, and sociologists themselves sense a need for standards by which to evaluate questions as well as needing better answers.

Moving from an orthodoxy of traditional positivist science, an increasing number of scholars have been searching for alternatives. Kloppenborg (1991) described some of this as deconstruction of traditional science and alternative voices searching for ways to effect a reconstruction. This paper is in the spirit of such alternative voices and reconstruction, although the approach differs from Kloppenborg. It relates to a memorable expression by Selznick (1966:x): "We cannot be content with unexamined formulae, no matter by whom expressed. We cannot forego a look behind the facade—even if it is our own." A brief critique of the traditional model of science and presentation of an alternative is the focus of this look behind the facade to examine the unexamined formula. A "technological science" model in sociology—or, to borrow the term from Latour (1987), a "technoscience" of sociology—is suggested. Technological science is not merely the scientific study of technology. Nor is it the

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