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ABSTRACT

A model was developed to explore the relationship between the personal characteristics of rural community residents, their social involvement, and their social awareness. Specific personal characteristic variables were educational level, gender, gross family income, and marital status. Social involvement variables were personal impact of farm financial strain, knowledge of a financially strained farm operator, and number of voluntary association memberships. Of the 527 rural community residents surveyed, 12.3% were not involved in any voluntary association, and 41% were members of only one voluntary association. Personal characteristic variables weighed heavily in determining the total number of voluntary association memberships. Education and gross family income were significantly related to the total number of voluntary association memberships, while gender and marital status were not significantly related. Of greatest importance in determining awareness of social issues was the degree to which the farm crisis had an impact on the residents personally. Based on this study, community change agents need to consider the use of relationship networks when attempting to disseminate information and advance social change. Change agents must also take into account the fact that persons with less education or with lower gross family incomes will be less likely to hold voluntary association memberships.
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THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP ON RURAL
COMMUNITY RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY ISSUES



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THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP ON RURAL
COMMUNITY RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY ISSUES

Gary A. Goreham, Richard W. Rathge, and F. Larry Leistritz

Over the past several decades, communities in rural America have undergone dramatic changes, such as declining populations, aging populations, loss of businesses, churches, and schools, and sagging economies. In agriculturally dependent rural counties, many of these changes have been related to the changing structure of agriculture, and more currently, to the economic crisis facing the agricultural industry.

Surveys indicate a growing awareness of and support for those farmers experiencing financial strain. However, resident awareness of how the financial strain facing farmers affects their rural communities has not been adequately explored (however, see Leistritz and Ekstrom, 1986). Without awareness of how nationwide economic and social forces affect rural communities, residents shall find it difficult to respond to such changes.

How have rural community residents become aware of the impact the current farm crisis is having on their rural communities? How does an awareness of social issues occur in general? A social issue is a "condition that captures public attention, generates public concern and controversy, and in some cases, leads to collective action" (Bassis, Gelles, and Levine, 1982:11). The research literature on awareness of social issues is sparse. One of the purposes of this study was to determine some of the mechanisms by which awareness of those issues and concerns that face a group of people is developed.

Berger and Neuhaus (1977) suggested that certain social structures mediate between individuals and other social structures. "Mediating structures" include the neighborhood, church, family, and voluntary

associations (VAs). Each of these structures help to shape individuals' awareness, definition, attitude, and choice of response toward the social structures that impact on their life.

In a study of political interest and awareness, Rich (1980) found that college students became more interested and aware of politics during four years of college. This increased interest and awareness was particularly heightened for women and students from lower income families.

Unfortunately, Rich did not provide a noncollege control group.

Nevertheless, his study does illustrate that awareness of issues is related to personal and social characteristics.

Membership and participation in the various mediating structures may be related to a heightened awareness of social issues. As this occurs, involvement in mediating structures increases interpersonal contacts. Although there may be varying degrees of overlap, different mediating structures will involve differing networks of persons due to the variation in their concerns. Through participation in additional mediating structures, a person shall have greater access to a larger number of people. As a result, that person should have greater access to information on those issues facing the community.

Differences have been observed between individuals' membership in the various types of mediating structures. This is especially true of VAs. By definition, membership in VAs is, for the most part, voluntary. The degree to which membership in VAs is, in fact, voluntary differs among various types of VAs. Some VAs, such as labor unions, home owners associations, and professional organizations, may be defined as "semivoluntary" (Booth, 1972;

Curtis, 1971; and Olsen, 1970). Such VAs usually have economic orientations and are designed to influence nonmembers for the benefit of its members.

Although numerous typologies of VAs have been devised, Gordon and Babchuk's (1959) continuum of instrumental and expressive VAs has been useful in understanding volunteer membership. "Instrumental" VAs are those whose members have delayed personal gratification in hopes of maintaining or changing conditions for nonmembers. Examples include civic and service clubs and churches. On the other hand, "expressive" VAs are those that are internally oriented. They focus primarily on gratifying the membership without intending to influence nonmembers. Examples include hobby and activity clubs. "Instrumental-expressive" VAs combine characteristics of both functions.

Membership in VAs has been related to a number of personal characteristic variables, such as income and occupation, education, sex, and marital status. People who work for pay are more likely to volunteer than are those who work as homemakers or who are unemployed. One survey found that 76 percent of persons in professional and business occupations serve in volunteer activities compared with 63 percent of farmers, 51 percent of clerical and sales workers, and 48 percent of unskilled workers ("1983 Gallop Survey on Volunteering," 1984). Individuals with post-high school education maintain more affiliations, drop fewer affiliations, and tend to add more affiliations over time than do individuals with no post-high school education (McPherson and Lockwood, 1980).

In a study of political interest and awareness, Rich (1980) found that college students became more interested and aware of politics during four years of college. This increased interest and awareness was particularly

heightened for women and students from lower income families. Unfortunately, Rich did not provide a noncollege control group. Nevertheless, his study does illustrate the fact that awareness of social issues are related to personal and social characteristics.

Social status, whether defined as income, occupation, or education, has been found to be a major variable related to VA involvement. Palisi and Jacobson (1977), studying the VA joining patterns of college students, found that status-dominant students tended to join instrumental VAs in greater frequency than did status-subordinate students. On the other hand, status-subordinate students joined expressive VAs more often than did their status-dominant counterparts. Measures of status dominance were based on social class, sex, age, marital status, religious denomination, year in school, college major, and grade point average.

The relationship between status dominance and VA participation could be postulated for at least two reasons. First, persons in higher status brackets have access to a greater fund of resources to manage. It would therefore be in their best interests to affiliate with others having similar concerns as a means of managing their resources. Second, persons in higher status brackets can benefit by affiliating with persons with similar concerns as a means of preserving their resources and social positions. They may choose to participate more readily in VAs because they have more at stake in the issues and decisions that face the community.

Most surveys in the United States indicate that men have historically belonged to more VAs than have women (Scott, 1957; Babchuk and Booth, 1969). Women, on the other hand, have contributed a greater amount of time to volunteer activities than have men. Although volunteerism has increased

from 52 percent of the adult population in 1981 to 55 percent in 1983, most of this increase can be explained by a rise in the number of male volunteers. Between 1981 and 1983, male volunteerism increased from 47 to 53 percent of all adult males. The percent of females working as volunteers remained the same at 56 percent ("1983 Gallup Survey on Volunteering," 1984)

Women tend to be over-represented in expressive organization and under-represented in instrumental organizations. The difference in involvement by type of VA may be due to general cultural definitions of appropriate gender role behavior (Hausknecht, 1962).

Gustafson, Booth, and Johnson (1979) compared rates of VA participation between men and women in five different countries: the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Mexico. They noted that differences in VA participation rates were related to higher participation of men in trade and labor unions. In economic and political organizations, excluding labor unions, the difference in participation rates between men and women was small (only 3% to 10%). They also found only a small difference (about 10%) in participation rates favoring men in social, charitable, and religious organizations.

Married persons tend to be members of VAs in greater frequency than single, widowed, separated, or divorced persons (Babchuk and Booth, 1969). However, McPherson and Luckwood (1980) found that, whereas married and single persons added very few new affiliations over time, there was a tendency for divorced, widowed, and separated persons to add a larger number of memberships over time.

Marital involvement in VAs may be a function of family life cycles. VA participation increases as the family progresses through its various stages.

As the family approaches its latter stages, as defined by aging of the parents and children leaving home, VA membership levels drop off (Atkinson, 1985; Smith and Reddy, 1972; Payne, et al., 1972).

Based on these studies, we would expect that the number of VA memberships is directly related to income and educational levels. We would also expect that males and married persons shall hold a larger number of VA memberships. Additionally, we would expect that higher levels of VA membership or any other form of social involvement would increase awareness of social issues. To test this idea, a model was developed to explore the relationship between the personal characteristics of rural community residents, their social involvement, and their social awareness. More specifically, the relationships between the personal characteristic variables of educational level, gender, gross family income, marital status, and the social involvement variables of personal impact of farm financial strain, knowledge of a financially strained farm operator, and number of VA memberships were used to determine level of social awareness (see Figure 1).

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Telephone surveys were conducted with a random sample of community residents in six North Dakota communities during the fall of 1986. The communities ranged in size from 1,631 to 16,280. They were selected as representative of rural communities throughout the state because of their economic bases, demographic characteristics, and geographic settings. Respondents were initially screened based on three criteria: first, they were not currently operating a farm or ranch; second, they were less than 65 years old; and third, they were currently residing within the town or city limits. Of the 1,366 residents contacted, 788 met the screening criteria.

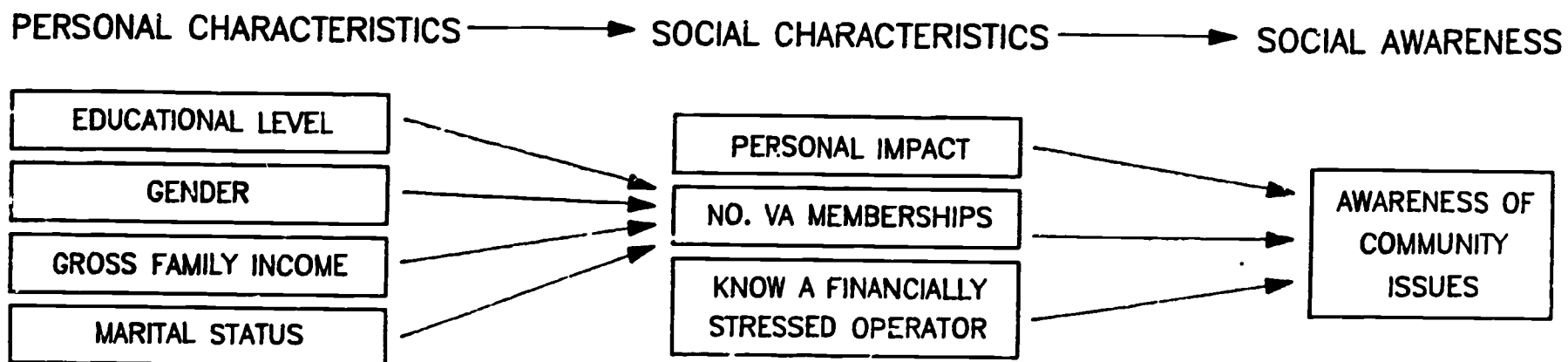


Figure 1. Relationship between status dominance, involvement in voluntary associations, and awareness of community issues.

Of these, 527 completed the survey yielding a response rate of 66.7 percent. The residents' characteristics were compared with the 1980 census of population. Given the screening criteria, the sample approximated the population's characteristics listed in the census (Leistritz, Ekstrom, and Vreugdenhil, 1987).

The survey included items pertaining to the residents' voluntary association memberships, personal and family characteristics, occupation, and financial condition. Scales were devised to determine the respondents' awareness of the various issues facing their community as these issues related to the current economic condition of agriculture.

The primary dependent variable, rural community social awareness, was found by adding the residents' responses to several items that measured the extent to which the current financial conditions in agriculture had affected their communities. These items included "your community," "schools," "law enforcement," "medical services," "mental health care," "churches," "public welfare," "family counseling and other services," "fire protection," and "other municipal services."

The first set of independent variables, personal characteristics, included educational level, gender, gross family income, and marital status. The second set of independent variables, social involvement, included an item designed to measure the degree to which the residents believed the current farm crisis had affected them personally. Other social involvement variables included the residents' personal knowledge of individual farm operators "who may be forced out of farming because of financial problems in the next one or two years" and the number of VA memberships they held. The

number of VA memberships was found by adding the number of VAs in which residents reported holding membership.

The analysis consisted, first, of regressing the number of VAs on both the personal characteristic variables and the social involvement variables. This procedure was used to determine the degree to which these two types of variables would affect VA memberships. Second, the level of awareness of social issues was regressed on the two sets of independent variables. It was hypothesized that social involvement variables would play a greater role in accounting for awareness of social issues than would personal characteristic variables.

Of special concern in determining the relative importance of the independent variables for explaining variance in the dependent variables was the Beta-weight. It is inappropriate to interpret b's as indicators of a variable's relative importance because measurement in different units makes the values of b non-comparable. Beta-weights are the independent variable's coefficients as expressed in standardized form, that is, in z-scores.

Tests were used to assure that problems of collinearity were avoided. Additionally, tests were conducted on the data to assure that it conformed to the assumptions of multivariate regression analysis of linearity, heteroscedasticity, and normal distribution. Dummy variables were used in the regressing procedure for gender (male=0; female=1) and marital status (nonmarried=0; married=1).

FINDINGS

Of the 527 rural community residents surveyed, only 65 (12.3 percent) were not involved in any VA and 214 (40.6 percent) were members of only one

VA. There were 154 (29.2 percent) residents with two VA memberships and 94 (17.8 percent) who held three or more VA memberships.

Nearly 80 percent of the residents (421 persons) held church membership. This high percentage of church membership is not surprising because 73.9 percent of the state's population is churched. The percentage of church membership for the counties in which the six test communities were located was over 70 percent (Quinn, et al., 1982). Overall, if the resident was a church member, chances were high that he/she was also a member of another VA. On the other hand, if the resident was a member in only nonchurch VAs, chances were not high for membership in some other nonchurch VA.

Following church membership, the type of VA with the highest membership was that of civic/service clubs. Nearly one-third (171 residents) of the sample reported holding membership in at least one such VA. Examples of these VAs included Lions, Kiwanis, and Elks.

The two VAs in which residents reported holding the fewest memberships were, first, professional or business organizations and, second, PTA or other school-related organizations. Nearly 23 percent (119 residents) were members of professional or business organizations, and only 18.7 percent were members of PTA or other school-related organizations.

To account for this variation in VA membership, the number of VAs in which the respondents held membership was regressed on the personal characteristic variables (education, gender, gross family income, and marital status) and the social relationship variables (personal impact and knowledge of a financially stressed farm operator) (see Table 1). As expected, personal characteristic variables were found to be the most

significant determinants of VA membership among rural community residents. Two personal characteristic variables were significantly related to the number of VA memberships. The respondents' education and their gross family incomes held Beta-weights of .260 and .221, respectively. The correlation coefficients for all dependent and independent variables are in Table 4.

One social involvement variable, knowledge of a financially stressed farm operator, was significantly related with the number of VA memberships and had a Beta-weight of .150 ($p = .05$). Using the six-variable model, 19 percent of the variance was explained.

Awareness of social issues ranged from a low score of 3 to a high score of 28, with a mean of 14.56 (s.d. = 2.92). Over 58 percent of the residents believed that the current farm crisis had affected their rural communities "a great deal" compared with only 4.7 percent who believed that their communities were "not at all" affected. The remaining 37.0 percent held that their communities had felt only "some" impact from the farm crisis.

Residents were aware that schools and public welfare were affected "a great deal" by the current farm crisis. Community services of which residents were least aware of having been affected by the farm crisis "a great deal" included police and fire protection (see Table 2).

Awareness level of rural community issues was regressed on the same set of personal characteristic variables and social involvement variables with the addition of the number of VA memberships (see Table 3). As expected, each of the social involvement variables was related to level of the awareness of social issues. The Beta-weights for personal impact, knowing a financially stressed farm operator, and number of voluntary association memberships was .291, .187, and .113, respectively.

Of the personal characteristic variables, only gender was significantly related to awareness level (Beta = .098; $p = .05$). The seven-variable model was able to account for only 19 percent of the variance in awareness levels.

DISCUSSION

Based on these findings, it appears that the model developed to determine those mechanisms that foster awareness of social issues was accurate. As expected, personal characteristic variables weighed heavily in determining the total number of VA memberships. Education and gross family income, both measures of social status, were significantly related to the total number of VA memberships, while gender and marital status were not significantly related.

The fact that gender and marital status were not related to the total number of VAs may not be surprising in that a wide variety of VA memberships were cited. When particular VAs were considered, both variables were significantly related to membership. For example, married residents were more likely to be church members (88.2 percent) than were their nonmarried counterparts (69.2 percent) ($X^2 = 31.44$; $df = 3$; $p = .000$). Had the family life cycle hypothesis, as suggested by Smith and Reddy (1972), been a factor affecting VA membership, we would have expected total VA membership to be related to marital status. Such, however, was not the case.

Male residents were more likely to be members of civic/service clubs than were female residents (43.0 percent and 23.4 percent, respectively) ($X^2 = 22.97$; $df = 1$; $p = .000$). Male residents also held more professional/business VA memberships than did female residents (28.0 percent and 18.1 percent, respectively) ($X^2 = 8.04$; $df = 1$; $p = .02$). On the other hand, females reported PTA and related school memberships more often

than did males (24.1 percent and 14.5 percent, respectively) ($\chi^2 = 7.68$; $df = 1$; $p = .006$). Since the VA membership patterns of the rural community residents were divided along traditional gender lines, these findings support those of Hausknect (1962). He suggested that cultural definitions may determine VA joining practices.

Only a small percentage of the variance in total number of VA memberships (18.7 percent) was explained by the variables included in the model. One of the difficulties common to studies of VAs is the concept of "membership." Different VAs have differing standards for membership. These standards range from dues requirements to a high level of commitment and participation. Some churches, for example, require certain religious rituals and/or a profession of faith as a basis for membership while others have no such requirements. Indeed, some churches do not even use the notion of "membership," but only that of "attendance" (Quinn, et al., 1982).

In the present study, the concept of membership was treated as a nominal variable which, when all memberships were added together, was treated as an interval variable. Residents were asked if they held membership in only four types of VAs: civic/service clubs, PTA/other school-related organizations, churches, and professional/business organizations (see Figure 2). When VA memberships were added for each resident, a maximum of four VA memberships was possible regardless of how many memberships of each type of VAs the resident held. Additional research needs to consider the total number of memberships held by residents.

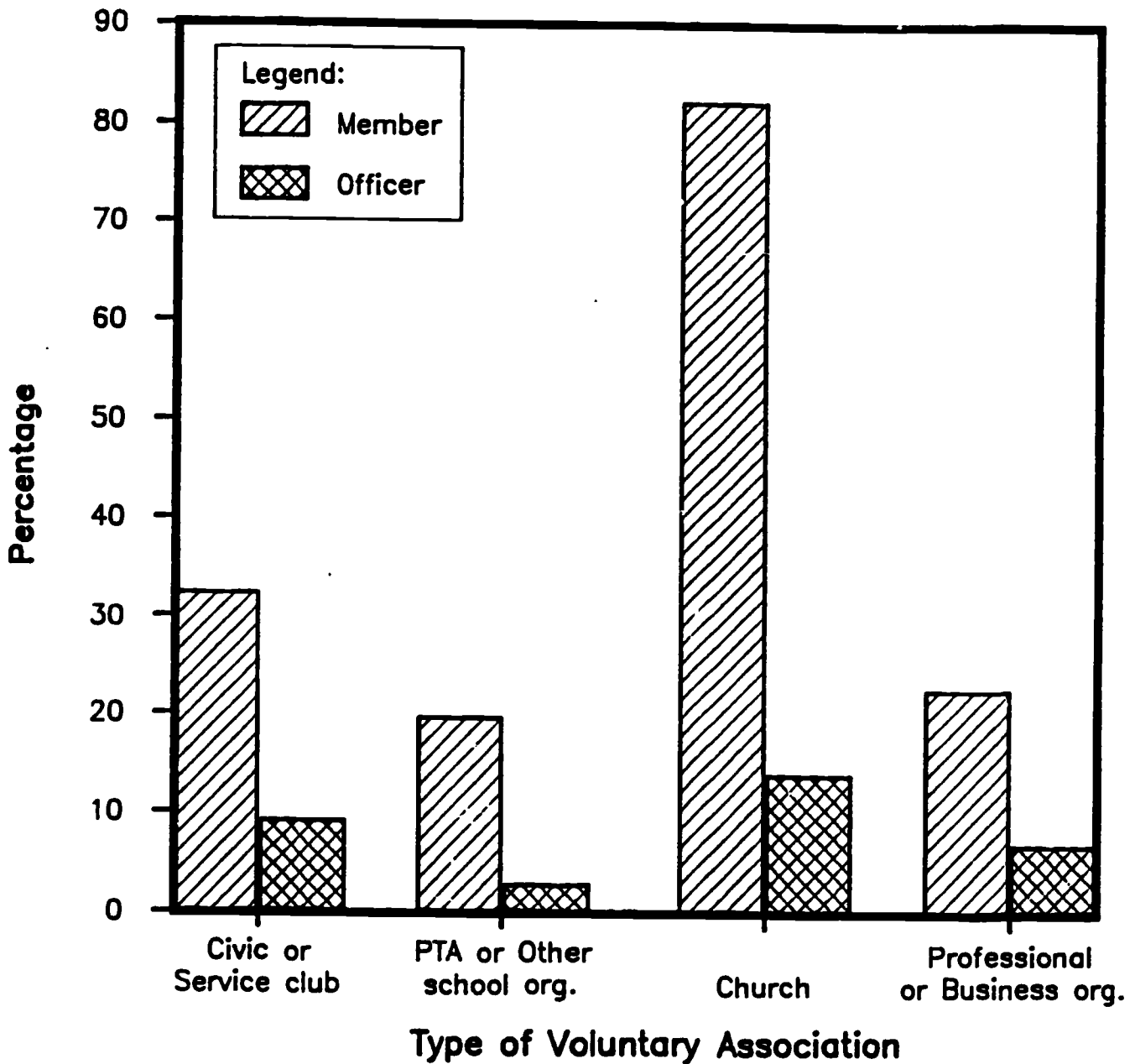


Figure 2. Voluntary Association Membership of Rural Community Residents.

As suggested by the model illustrated in Figure 1, social involvement variables played a more significant role in determining the rural community residents' awareness of social issues than did personal characteristic variables. Of greatest importance in determining awareness of social issues was the degree to which the farm crisis had an impact on the residents personally. This would imply that those residents who were involved in receipt or delivery of services or business in the community, that is, those most socially imbedded, would be the ones most aware of the farm crisis' impact. Knowledge of a financially stressed farm operator and number of VA memberships also played relatively important roles in determining awareness of social issues.

Although social involvement variables were significantly related to awareness of social issues, only 18.7 percent of the variance in awareness was explained by the model. At least three reasons could be cited for this low percentage. First, as noted above, the measurement used to determine the number of VA memberships may have undercounted the actual number of memberships. Additionally, membership assumes participation. Without actual participation in a VA, its informing effect may be diminished. Further research should take into consideration the residents' levels of VA involvement or participation, whether measured as time, personal contacts, or activities.

A second reason for the low R-squared could be that additional variables may have been useful in determining awareness of social issues. For example, access to and use of media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, may play an important informing role for making residents aware of social issues. If access to and use of the media is related to personal

characteristics, such as education and income, it would likely play a mediating role between personal characteristics and awareness.

A third explanation for the low R-squared could be that the residents were reporting accurately the impacts of the farm crisis on their communities. The community services in question were based in the local community but probably had financial assistance from funding sources outside the local community. For example, 76.5 percent of the residents reported that the farm crisis had "not at all" affected mental health care in their communities. Such services would likely receive support from the state government. Thus, despite financial stress in the particular rural locale, mental health services may not be as severely affected as other sectors of the community. This being the case, variation in the awareness of social issues may not have been great enough to fully measure the actual range in residents' awareness levels.

The present study does indicate that social involvement has an important bearing on one's awareness of social issues. Such awareness is imperative if people are to respond to the forces changing the world in which they live. At least two implications may be drawn from this study. First, community change agents need to consider the use of relationship networks when attempting to disseminate information and advance social change. They need to make use of those organizations that mediate between the more macrosocial structures, which the change agent may represent, and the individuals in the community. One potentially useful mediating structure for the change agent to consider would be the VAs in place in the community.

A second implication stemming from this study involves the personal characteristics of the rural community residents likely to hold membership in VAs. Since, as has been noted above, there are differing rates of membership in VAs, not all persons shall be equally impacted by VA membership involvements. Persons with less education or with lower gross family incomes will be less likely to hold VA memberships. Thus, as change agents attempt to use VAs as a means of community change, persons from the lower socioeconomic strata may be left out. This is not to say that such persons are not involved in a social network or mediating structure. Rather, appropriate social structures must be sought through which to impact this group of people.

Rural America is changing dramatically, and rural community residents are becoming increasingly aware of how these changes are impacting them. It is primarily through their social involvements that this awareness can be fostered and responses made to the changes and challenges they face.

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TABLE 1. REGRESSION OF NUMBER OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS ON PERSONAL CHARACTERISTIC VARIABLES AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP VARIABLES; NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITIES STUDY, 1986.

Variables	Number of Voluntary Association Memberships		
	b	Beta	t-ratios
Personal Characteristics			
Education	.247 **	.260	5.817
Gender	-.061	-.030	-.683
Gross Family Income:	.000 **	.221	4.620
Marital Status	.030	.013	.279
Social Involvement			
Personal Impact	.110	.077	1.669
Know a Stressed Farm Operator	.161 *	.150	3.247
Intercept	.297	—	.921

Adjusted R-squared = .187
N = 433

* Significant at .001 level.
** Significant at .0001 level.

TABLE 2. RURAL COMMUNITY RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF CURRENT FARM CRISIS IMPACT ON SELECTED COMMUNITY SERVICES; NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITY STUDY, 1986.

Community Service	Level of Impact by Current Farm Crisis					
	"a great deal"		"some"		"not at all"	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
School	90	17.1	244	45.5	191	36.4
Public Welfare	66	13.0	189	37.3	252	49.7
Churches	51	9.8	199	38.2	271	52.0
Family Counseling and Other Serv.	46	9.2	113	22.6	341	68.2
Mental Health Care	38	7.5	81	16.0	388	76.5
Medical Services	18	3.4	102	19.5	402	77.0
Other Municipal Services	6	1.1	35	6.7	483	92.2
Law Enforcement	5	1.0	54	10.3	467	88.8
Fire Protection	2	0.4	19	3.6	503	96.0

TABLE 3. REGRESSION OF AWARENESS OF RURAL COMMUNITY ISSUES ON PERSONAL CHARACTERISTIC VARIABLES AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP VARIABLES; NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITY STUDY, 1986.

Variables	Awareness		
	b	Beta	t-ratio
Personal Characteristics			
Education	.142	.052	1.112
Gender	.571 *	.098	2.199
Gross Family Income	.000	-.005	.109
Marital Status	.073	.011	.240
Social Involvement			
Personal Impact	1.209 ***	.291	6.321
Know a Stressed Farm Operator	.578 ***	.187	3.990
Number of VA Memberships	.327 **	.113	2.338
Intercept	11.529 ***	—	12.377

Adjusted R-squared = .187
N = 433

- * Significant at .05 level.
 ** Significant at .01 level.
 *** Significant at .0001 level

TABLE 4. CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR VARIABLES INCLUDED IN THE NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITY STUDY, 1986.

	Aware of Soc Issues	VA Mbrsp	Gender *	Marital Status *	Educ Lvl	Gross Family Income	Personal Impact	Know Fin Optr
Aware of Soc. Issues	—	.189 .000 526	.009 .826 527	.064 .142 526	.093 .034 525	.049 .295 452	.370 .000 571	.324 .000 525
VA Mbrsps		—	-.080 .066 526	.167 .000 525	.326 .000 524	.295 .000 451	.131 .003 510	.223 .000 524
Gender *			—	-.208 .000 526	-.101 .021 525	-.166 .000 452	-.207 .540 510	-.046 .290 525
Marital Status *				—	.050 .251 525	.518 .000 452	.084 .058 510	.027 .544 524
Educ. Level					—	.157 .000 451	.001 .982 509	.118 .007 523
Gross Family Income						—	.055 .254 437	.037 .432 451
Personal Impact							—	.335 .000 509
Know a Financ. Stressed Operator								—

* Indicates column or row of Spearman correlation coefficients.
All others are Pearson.

Note: Top number is correlation coefficient, middle number is p;
bottom number is N.