DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 118 RC 020 777

AUTHOR Hedlund, Dalva E.
TITLE Rural? In Educational Research: It's a Matter of Purpose.
PUB DATE Oct 96
NOTE 16p.; Paper prepared for the Research Forum at the Annual Meeting of the National Rural Education Association (San Antonio, TX, October 11-14, 1996).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Influence; *Context Effect; *Cultural Context; *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Influence; *Research Design; Research Utilization; *Rural Education; Rural Schools; Rural Youth
IDENTIFIERS *Interpretive Research; *Rural Culture

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the meaning of "rural" in rural education research and the relationship of this meaning to the research project's design and purpose. In traditional, comparative research designs, "rural" becomes a part of research that involves or implies comparisons with the nonrural. In contrast, emergent, interpretive designs make "rural" central to rural education research in a more subtle and profound sense. Interpretive designs make the rural context in rural education research more relevant by seeking to understand people and their actions in a holistic sense rather than aiming to predict and control individual variables, and by focusing on the conscious intentional aspects of people. Understanding the meaning or organization of a person's experience requires analysis of the person's unique dynamics and history, local culture and social structures, and collective language and symbol systems. Examples drawn from studies of rural teen pregnancy and of the impact of teachers on rural adolescents illustrate the utility of each type of research design, depending on the research purpose. Results that describe the relationship between individual variables are often applicable across educational settings. Because of the unique context, interpretive results are singularly rural, contributing to an understanding of both rural adolescents as human beings and the dynamics of development in a small rural school. Contains 10 references. (SV)

# Rural? In Educational Research: It's a Matter of Purpose

Dalva E. Hedlund
Department of Education
Cornell University



Prepared for discussion at the National Rural Education Association Research Forum, San Antonio, Texas, October 11-14, 1996.

# Rural? In Educational Research: It's a Matter of Purpose

Dalva E. Hedlund
Cornell University

As an extension of an ongoing research project, the Program on Rural Youth Development (PRYDe), I recently completed a study of the effect of teachers on rural adolescents (Hedlund & Hine, 1995). In trying to understand what the participants, graduates of rural high schools, were saying, we began to question whether it matters that these were rural adolescents. Would what they said about the impact of teachers on their development be applicable in a suburban or urban setting as well?

The answer was yes, in one sense. What participants said about the effects of teacher actions do seem applicable in any educational setting. But in another sense, one could not understand these adolescents, the particular interactions they had with teachers, and what they chose to do with their lives without considering the rural context of their lives:

> What is rural about the impact of teachers on adolescents? From one perspective, our participants are talking about teacher actions that could occur in any school setting and so the conclusions have wide generality to adolescent-teacher interactions. From another perspective, the interviews are so filled with the rural context of schooling that almost everything participants said applies to rural schools.

Some of the characteristics of rural schools were mentioned above:

- Teachers know students over a long period of time.
- Students may be the second or third generation of their family in the school.
- Various labels tend to get applied to students from different localities or different socioeconomic groups.
- Many of our participants, particularly obvious among those from a farm family, discussed a set of personal values that represent rural experience (Esterman & Hedlund, 1995).
- Community social life and school professional life become intertwined in a rural setting.
- Many participants knew teachers in various ways outside of school and the student's and teacher's families often socialized together.
- In a rural school it is not uncommon for a student to have a relative working there. (Hedlund & Hine, 1995, p. 7).

On the one hand, many of our conclusions seem to apply to all teachers and to any school setting. For example, "do not denigrate a student's work publicly" was a conclusion based on teacher actions reported by several participants. That is an action that would seem to have negative results across most educational contexts. But equally important, to really <u>understand</u> rural adolescents you need to understand the small rural school, the rural community, and the rural culture in which growing up and schooling occurs. Josselson (1995) explains understanding as

the study of experience, and argues that psychology is the study of how experience is organized, interpreted and reshaped throughout the life cycle. The emphasis is on understanding the whole person making meaning out of the experience of his/her life.

One graduate discussed the positive impact of a teacher for whom she babysat. When the teacher and his wife came home in the evening, they would sit with the student, have coffee, and simply talk about what was happening in their lives. In the nature of a rural community, this teacher's family was also friendly with the student's family. This was an important interaction with significant positive consequences for the participant that she found difficult to define. We might say that her self-esteem was improved, or she felt validated and more confident of her abilities to responsibly perform an adult role. Participants related many instances such as this, situations with a particularly "rural" flavor, that had significant effects on their development. In a different setting we might even question the ethics of the dual relationship involved in hiring one of your current students.

**A Question of Research Design?**

**Traditional, Comparative Designs.** "Rural" may, of course, become relevant to the purpose of the research in the definition of the research question. What is the relationship between degree of rurality of the high school and college attendance? Do rural high school students perform less well than would be expected from their grades on standardized achievement tests? What sorts of jobs do rural high school graduates choose? How big a problem is drug abuse among rural high school students? By definition, these questions include "rural" as part of the research design. The examination of these types of questions may involve "experimental control" through a comparison to non-rural high school students.

**Emergent, Interpretive Designs.** There is a more subtle, and more profound sense in which the design of research can make "rural" central to rural education research. This has to do with both *how* we want to know something and *what* it is we want to know. The more I want to *understand* people and their actions in a holistic sense rather than to predict and control individual variables (how I want to know), and the more I focus on the conscious, intentional aspects of people (what I want to know), then the more that "rural" in rural education research becomes relevant.

In theory, we can define our variables more precisely and control (or limit) the context drastically to approximate the experimental ideal of manipulating one independent variable and measuring its effect on one dependent variable. We might, for example, be interested in using the most easily-read type font in a text book. One could approach the experimental ideal by precisely exposing different letters in different fonts and measuring recognition time. Of course, our results may not account for readability when letters are combined into words or printed with a particular spacing on different sized pages of varying quality paper, etc. Approaching the empirical/experimental ideal is even more feasible if we leave the human realm altogether and study only physical variables.

Polkinghorne (1988, p. 4) argues that "Human beings have a synthetic kind of existence in which the realms of matter, life, and meaning are fused." Human experience is a synthesis of all three levels of existence. We can ask questions about humans at any combination of these levels: material, organic, or conscious.

We may conclude that the more we want to understand a person or a human situation, the more we need to attend to the meaning realm. Meaning is closely tied to language activity and takes on a shared dimension with the experience of other humans. The more "human" the variables we are interested in studying -- variables such as values, love, life decisions, or a how a person conceives of

her/himself -- then the more we have to understand how a person makes meaning in the context of her/his life.

**Emerging Paradigms**

Academic psychology generally legitimated a view of research that ignored consciousness and intentional behavior by adopting a positivistic framework. Inquiry, then, was limited to questions about the relationships between individual variables that could be "objectively" measured. Our hypothetical study of type font and recognition time is a reasonable example of this type of inquiry. Educational research generally followed the example of psychological research.

Psychology, however, is in the throes of redefining itself. Much of the critical work is being done within the study of education (for example, see Trumbull, 1996). There is not yet an agreed upon paradigm for a new science, but there are common concerns among most of the new approaches as pointed out by Smith, Harre, and Langenhove (1996) in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Holistic understanding, with a focus on meaning making processes and their expression through language, seems to define the emerging concerns of recent attempts to reconceive research about people. The volume edited by Smith, Harre, and Langenhove (1996) sets forth cogent discussions of many recent approaches. They make the point that the post-positivist research paradigms do not replace older paradigms. Rather, the ferment in the field is an attempt to broaden the boundaries of psychological and educational research with a range of methodologies and conceptual approaches.

**The Rural Context**

Important for our focus on "rural" in rural education research is the inclusion of the rural context to gain an understanding of meaning or the organization of an individual's experience. To try to understand rural students and how they think, plan, and act on the world, we have to understand the context of their lives and schooling. Melton (1983), defines "rural" as a culture, or arguably, a subculture. Although one does not have to endorse a cultural psychology to recognize the importance of context on individuals, it is useful to consider cultural psychology as an approach to rural education research that emphasizes the importance of context.

Much (1996) discusses three interrelated systems of analysis for a cultural psychology. First is the person and her/his unique dynamics and history. Second is society or the local social structures of a society. Third is the collective symbol system the culture uses to organize and interpret experience. "These three systems are fundamentally interpenetrating and mutually constitutive, which is to say that they co-create or mutually form one another" (Much, 1996, p. 100). This is similar to the original conception of the Program on Rural Youth Development (Hedlund & Ripple, 1990; Hedlund, 1992), where the major interacting influences in rural adolescent developmental processes were seen as the school, the community, the family, social life, and the self. Our conception left out the language or symbol systems used to interpret experience, which, as anyone involved with rural communities knows, take on distinctive "rural" flavors that vary with area of the country.

The difficulty most of us trained in a measuring, counting, predicting model of research have is grasping the holistic sense of understanding implied in the

emerging models for research. It is exactly at the level of understanding how the three "systems" that Much describes co-create one another and make meaning out of individual experience that "rural" becomes critical in rural education research.

**Teen Pregnancy**

A brief example may help illustrate the issue. Teen pregnancy is a problem in rural areas, as in the rest of the country. It can be studied statistically and demographically. It can be examined in terms of intervention programs and how much knowledge teens have about contraceptives and alternatives to intercourse. We can approach the issue social-psychologically and try to understand peer pressures to engage in sexual behavior or ask about the perceived benefits of being a teen mother. None of these approaches are wrong. Each provides a perspective on the issue. So the more ways we study the problem, the better we are likely to grasp it.

We grappled with pregnancy in the PRYDe research program. For example, one Upstate New York school in our study reported pregnancies as early as the fifth grade. Obviously a problem; at least from the school's perspective. It turns out that this is a consolidated school building with fifth through twelfth grade in the same building and all ages riding the same bus. The school did segregate grades by floor, with limited access between, to attempt to reduce problems. But in discussing the issue with school administrators, the nurse, and teachers, it became clear that the extended family structure of that rural area was the critical factor. Families tended to group together in "compounds," adding a mobile home or building a new house when a new family unit was formed. Social and emotional support for a pregnant teen always seemed readily available from someone in the extended family. So, first, there was not an absolute taboo on becoming an unwed mother: new family members were always welcome. Second, there was always an aunt or cousin or

someone to care for the baby while the mother returned to school or went to work. A participant in our study who was pregnant at the time of this interview (tenth grade), was asked by the interviewer:

> Interviewer: Do you all spend, like, holidays together?
> Participant: Yeah, with the whole family.
> I: How many is that?
> P: There's a lot. Like, we have like a hundred something with the whole family.
> I: Oh, my gosh! How do you do that? How do you get everybody together?
> P: My grandmother's house, it's really big, because they have a lot, because my grandmother had eight kids so they made the house big. So, we barely fit in there. There's not enough room. Plus, most of them are, like, little kids and stuff. So it's kind of hard to get around them and stuff like that. We all try to squeeze.

The prospective father had left the area without taking any responsibility for the child. The mother felt she was getting support from the teachers at the school, but fellow students were hostile. The interview continued:

> I: High school can be a really hard time, (Um-hmm.) To deal with things like that. (Yeah.) How are things with your family about it?
> P: They're excited!
> I: Really? -- Oh!
> P: Yeah, at first they weren't but, like, like the first week it was really hard. But right after that they were all excited and picking on me, calling me preggo and everything else. So, it helps out though, you know, gets me going again and laughing and stuff.

The interviewer did not expect the response "They're excited!" The family was providing support early on in the pregnancy, which proceeded to arrangements in the next year for child care while the participant returned to school. And even though fellow students seemed hostile toward the participant, they gave her a lot of attention. And after the baby was born she brought her to school to show off. The father did return and basically became part of the participant's family, even though they were not married. Next year she discussed the impact of the baby and the experiences of other family members who were unwed mothers:

> I: Was there anything in your future that you wanted to do, maybe thoughts of going to college or anything like that, that you don't think you'll be able to do now?
> S: No. I never thought about going to college. I mean, it's really hard for me right now to get through high school, so I go: "What's the sense in going to college?" Because I have a cousin doing the same thing. She has a two year old and is trying to go to college, and it's hard on her she said. So, the only thing I'm just trying to hopefully do is to try and find a job to help out some more.

This brief example shows how important a holistic understanding of the rural context is to understand this young woman's pregnancy and how an interpretive understanding of this particular individual's situation enlightens the issue of teen pregnancy in this school and probably in many rural areas. To further our understanding, we could look more closely at the history and personality dynamics of this particular young woman, which certainly were operative in the situation, and we could investigate local stories that define desirable qualities of masculinity and femininity. I am purposely ignoring the fact that in the telling of this story to a particular listener the meaning is shaped somewhat. That is for another discussion

of method and epistemology.

**It all depends on your purpose**

Making a difference in education always means a particular intervention with a particular student. It always comes down to the goal of understanding a particular individual at a particular point in time. Educational researchers too often forget this point. We tend to get so wrapped up in the elegance of research design and mutual criticism over the finer points of research philosophy that our efforts never touch the real world. Or, particularly in education, we often get around the problem altogether by just doing a preliminary survey of what administrators or teachers think about something.

Traditional research designs (illustrated in Table 1) can yield important, useful information. Take our conclusion "do not denigrate a student's work publicly," from the impact of teachers study cited earlier. It is apparent that this common-sense rule is widely applicable. We used a critical incidents method in this study. It is a qualitative method in a traditional research design with the purpose of identifying and counting incidents and relating specific teacher behaviors to outcomes. It is when we look inside the critical incidents at the language participants used and consider contextual factors that the study becomes more interpretive and holistic -- and more rural.

The emerging research designs are more pointed at the meaning level of human existence (again, illustrated in Table 1). Each of these perspectives can inform the others in useful ways. The more we are concerned with issues of meaning in the educational process and understanding the intentional behavior of human beings, the more appropriate the emergent research designs become.

It is a matter of purpose. When studying rural education, "rural" is relevant to research when "rural" variables are built into the research question in a comparative sense. And "rural" is relevant to research when the purpose is holistic understanding of an individual or situation. Many of the results from our study of the impact of teachers on rural adolescents, generally those describing the relationship between individual variables, do seem applicable across most educational settings. At the same time, because of the unique context, many of the results are singularly rural, contributing to an understanding of both rural adolescents as human beings and the dynamics of development in a small rural school.

Table 1. Concerns of the Emerging and Conventional Research Paradigms in Education and Psychology (Adapted from Smith, Harre, & Langenhove, 1996, p. 4).

| Emerging | Conventional |
|---|---|
| Understanding, describing | Measuring, counting, predicting |
| Meaning | Causation, frequency |
| Interpretation | Statistical analysis |
| Language, discourse, symbol | Reduction to numbers |
| Holistic | Atomistic |
| Particularities | Universals |
| Cultural context | Context-free |
| Subjectivity | Objectivity |

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Printed Name/Position/Title: Prof. Dalva E. Hedlund

Organization/Address: Department of Education
Cornell University
403 Kennedy Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853-4203

Telephone: 607 255 9255

FAX:

E-Mail Address: delv2@cornell.edu

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