CONTENTS

Introduction

STUDYING THE COMMUNITY IN RURAL AMERICA

Community sociology has had its ups and downs over the past half century and so, it seems, has the community. Perhaps the sociology of the community has changed more in this century than have the fundamental qualities of the community itself, or at least that is a subject for debate and discussion. In any event, the sociology of community has changed. The tradition of community ethnographies of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States gave way in the 1960s to comparative statistical analyses of specific and limited aspects of community organization, and in the 1970s, to the study of phenomena in local societies that have little to do with community as such. In fact, by the end of the 1970s, some leading writers on social organization were ready to abandon the conventional concept of the community. Some sociologists would argue today that *community* is only a romantic term for a way of life long since passed in the progress of civilization. However, the scholarly literature is showing signs of a revival of interest in the community, especially in rural sociology, and community action has emerged again as an emphasis in rural policy. Whether this means the community itself is making a comeback remains to be seen.

Two of the major questions among those addressed in contemporary essays and research on this subject highlight the issues in the study of the community in rural areas. First, how is it possible for the community to persist in modern society? Second, how does ruralness affect this possibility? These questions relate to the essential elements of the concept of the community, and attempts to answer them can help to clarify those elements. A review of these questions provides an introduction to the study of the community in rural America.

Sociological approaches to these questions often emphasize some particular aspect of local social life more than other aspects. Ecological approaches emphasize adaptive mechanisms. Cultural studies concentrate on institutions and values. Organizational approaches examine

structures and relationships that integrate a local society and relate it to the larger society. Social psychological studies measure community identification and satisfaction. In this study the emphasis is on social interaction, a pervasive feature of community life that underlies and gives substance to the ecological, cultural, organizational, and social psychological aspects. Interaction is thus a core property of the community, one without which community, as defined from virtually any sociological perspective, could not exist. Moreover, the interactional approach concentrates on an aspect of community that persists in modern society while other aspects appear to be losing their distinctiveness. For these reasons, an approach that emphasizes social interaction is most appropriate for understanding the influence of ruralness on community life in modern society.

Conventionally, there are three elements of the community, namely, a locality, a local society, and a process of locality-oriented collective actions. The third of these is the focus here and is termed "the community field" (Kaufman 1959; Wilkinson 1970b). A locality is a territory where people live and meet their daily needs together. A local society is a comprehensive network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests. A community field is a process of interrelated actions through which residents express their common interest in the local society. While sociologically important units other than the community could embody one or two of these elements, the community, as used here, embodies all three elements.

This definition rules out a number of things we might call community in everyday language, or, for that matter, in sociology. A neighborhood, for example, is only part of a community, because a neighborhood by definition is not the whole of a local society. A gathering of like-minded scientists (or musicians or political activists or whatever) might be called a community, but it is not one by this definition. Similarly, people who think of themselves as a community do not necessarily constitute a community, unless they also live and act together in a local society. Moreover, the extent of community in a local society varies through time depending on the actions people take in response to local problems and opportunities. The combination with all three elements present delineates the community as a most distinctive sociological unit.

While this is a restrictive definition, it specifies a social entity that can play a vital role in human experience and well-being. Part of the importance of the community is its role as the setting and the mechanism of empirical contact between the individual and society. This is a crucial role because immediate social experience is necessary to social

well-being. This is true because society is an abstraction one can experience only indirectly or symbolically. The empirical manifestation of society is interaction in localities. Contact with society occurs first in family and then, more comprehensively, in the community. The community also is important because of its role in meeting the needs of people, especially the needs for collective involvement and social definition of self. One meets these needs primarily through interactions and involvements in the local society. The quest for community, therefore, is a central theme in human history, past and present.

The view that the community is imperiled is an old, if not outmoded, one in sociology. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theories of societal transformation described the demise of the isolated close-knit community and its folk institutions in the face of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. Emile Durkheim, at the close of the nineteenth century, discussed the change from a pattern of communities integrated within themselves to a pattern of local integration into the larger society. Pitirim Sorokin, writing in the 1920s, established the transformation theory as a basic paradigm for rural sociology. Later, in the 1960s, Roland Warren popularized the view that a "great change" is altering the conventional bases of cohesion in local societies. In this latter paradigm, the community, as a complete and cohesive local society, is seen as a vestige of the old order.

In the third edition of *The Community in America*, for example, Warren (1978) observes that the community has become a turbulent arena of self-seeking actions and can no longer be understood as a concrete collectivity or system. Community interaction still occurs, he says, but the community as a systemic entity appears only sporadically and liaisons among major actors in the community arena tend to be short-lived.

Others, writing from a critical perspective, see capitalist development as the undoing of community, at least for the short run. The modern community, from this perspective, is organized and manipulated to facilitate the exploitation of labor and the accumulation of profits, although over the long run Marxian theory sees community as something to be achieved by society after the class dialectic comes to a head. Even without Marxian assumptions, many writers observe that capitalist development is divisive and that the community, as Harvey Molotch (1976) says, is a "growth machine" serving not the common good but the interests of those who manipulate that machine for profit.

Indeed, in a modern capitalist society one must be cautious about accepting apparent evidence of solidarity on face value. Such events as the erection of a community monument for the staging of an annual

community celebration might be taken to indicate a strong bond of mutual identity and collective-mobilization potential in a local society, but closer examination sometimes reveals such events to be shams perpetrated by a self-interested elite for the purpose of masking class exploitation and domination.

Furthermore, as Berry Wellman argues in the introduction to his analysis of "The Community Question" (1979), the search for an all-embracing solidarity in a local society expresses a conservative value bias, or what he calls an obsession with order and control in American sociology. He argues that consensus among diverse segments of a complex local society can only be gained at the expense of freedom. Tolerance of diversity and open negotiation among conflicting interest groups would reduce the probability that community, as an area-wide phenomenon, could persist. Wellman thus poses his community question as an issue not in the overall network of social relationships in the locality but in intimate ties among people wherever these might occur in space.

From almost any perspective, one can find serious problems with each of the three elements of the conventional definition of the community. The *locality* today tends to have vaguely delineated boundaries and boundaries that overlap with those of other settlements. These boundaries, such as they are, also change rapidly as people move about over wide territories to meet their daily needs. The *local society* today is comprised in large part of units and branches of regional, national, and multinational organizations. Firms, voluntary associations, and even individuals tend to be linked to social units outside the locality, and these extra-local connections can be stronger and more influential than the ties among groups and individuals within the local society. The field of *community action* perhaps is the most problematic of the three essential components of a community. As Charles Tilly (1973) says, "urbanization of the world" has sharply reduced the probability that communities will "act." By this he means the probability that collective behavior will express a widespread solidarity or identity of interest in the local society is reduced. Communities can still act, he says, but only under rare circumstances, such as when a community with a history of activeness experiences a pervasive threat to its dominance of the local territory.

If the boundaries are fuzzy, the local society is dominated by extra-local ties, and local action often expresses private rather than collective interests, why should we continue to search for the community? Why not focus our attention instead on those structures and involvements through which people now meet the needs they once met through community relationships?

The thesis of this study is that the community has not disappeared and has not ceased to be an important factor in individual and social well-being. People still live together in places, however fluid might be the boundaries of those places. They still encounter the larger society primarily through interactions in the local society. And, at crucial moments, they still can act together to express common interests in the place of residence. Local social life has become very complex in the typical case, but complexity and the turbulence associated with it do not in and of themselves rule out community.

There is considerable room for doubt that a major change has in fact occurred over the past century or so in the fundamental role of the community in American social life, notwithstanding dramatic changes in technology and culture and in many other aspects of social organization. As shown in historical analyses by Thomas Bender (1978) and Robert Richards (1978), the notion of a recent change from more to less local autonomy does not fit well with the facts of American history, although such a transition surely occurred earlier in Europe. Local communities have been tightly linked to large centers virtually from the beginning of European settlement in America. Moreover, the well-being of people in outlying areas tends to vary positively, not negatively, with the strength of connections to larger centers. Likewise, local solidarity, as expressed through collective mobilization to solve local problems, tends to increase with access to outside resources, not to decrease. A transformation might have occurred in the history of the community, but the transformation was well-advanced by the time communities were being formed by European migrants to North America. The transformation theory gives a plausible interpretation of some monumental changes years ago, but is less useful for understanding trends and problems in modern communities.

The essential elements of the community were as problematic two centuries ago in North America as they are today, when compared to the ideal type of the ancient agrarian village. Territorial boundaries rarely have been fixed. The key point in understanding the territorial element of the community, however, is that the community has a geographic location, not that the boundaries of that location are fixed and sharply drawn. Similarly, the local society throughout modern history has been tied to the larger society through diverse channels. The local manifestations of society, nonetheless, are local. There is an unfortunate tendency in the community literature to draw a sharp distinction between the local and the extra-local. Most of the important social phenomena in a community are both local and extra-local, and

local importance of a community characteristic often increases with the extent of its extra-local significance. Similarly, the observation that the community arena contains a turbulent field of self-seeking special interest games could have been made about American towns in the 1700s as well as today. In the midst of the turbulence now, as then, community emerges in the local society when the latent bond of common interest in the place—the shared investment in the common field of existential experience—draws people together and enables them to express common sentiments through joint action.

Community sociology needs a conception of the community relevant to the social conditions of the Western world of the past two or three centuries. What the sociology of community expresses mainly is a conception of community relevant to the Middle Ages and a lament that community thus conceived is being destroyed by long-distance communications, multi-site organizations, rationality of culture, and other modern trends. What is needed is a conception of community that recognizes its complexity. The community is an arena of both turbulence and cohesion, of order and disarray, of self-seeking and community-oriented interaction; and it manifests its dualities simultaneously. It should be studied for what it is and on its own grounds—not as an ideal type of an old form of social life, but as a dynamic and changing field of interacting forces.

Contrary to what is assumed in attempts to apply the transformation model today, a rural location can be a serious drag on community development. The transformation of society might be a reason for this, but that, as argued above, is old news. Rural location has been an impediment for many years to the realization of community in local settlements. As Durkheim (1933) explains, solidarity in the modern world requires moral (or dynamic) density, and moral density is low when material (or physical) density is low. Today that means rural areas have trouble supporting community.

In rural areas of modern society, the territory of the community typically is very large, contrary to the common observation that rural means a small place. Residents of rural areas often travel over a large territory to meet their daily needs. As Amos Hawley (1950, 150) comments, the community can be defined ecologically by the territory within which the population meets its daily needs. The rural community territory tends to be so large, in fact, that it limits the strength of ties among the associations through which various needs are met. Further, many of these associations of rural people are located physically in distant urban centers, and residents of a given rural area often have direct personal

involvements in several different centers. Consequently, rural residents tend to meet few of their daily needs together in the rural territory they share. This tendency could be a major long-time contributor to what only recently has come to be recognized as a serious barrier to the development of community in rural areas. A major problem of the rural community, therefore, is the lack of sufficient material density (to use Durkheim's terms) to support the level of moral or dynamic density needed for organic solidarity in modern times.

Another way of expressing this problem is with the idea of the "strength of weak ties," an idea applied in this study. Structural stability, according to Mark Granovetter (1973), depends on weak ties (i.e., on formal and transitory contacts among relative strangers) to bind strong ties (i.e., intimate and continuing relations among family members and friends) into larger structures. Otherwise, says Granovetter, "strong ties, breeding local cohesion, lead to overall fragmentation" (1973, 1378). This is to say the strong ties in segments of a community can disrupt the whole of the community. Applying this notion to the rural setting, one finds evidence of a deficiency. Rural areas have plenty of strong ties, probably about the same number per capita as in urban areas, but they have few weak ties. The weak ties for residents of rural areas tend to be in contacts outside the rural area—in the larger rural-urban territory where rural people meet their daily needs. Thus, if this is correct, the shortage of weak ties in rural areas can retard the development of community.

Essays in critical theory point to another potential barrier to community development in rural areas or, from the perspective taken by Manuel Castells in *The Urban Question* (1977), another interpretation of the same situation as discussed from an ecological perspective. Using Marxian concepts, one can argue that urban-based capitalists organize and manipulate hinterland "peripheries" to assure maximum flow of profits on their investments to the centers where they extract and accumulate the profits. This entails assigning particular specialized uses to places, thus enforcing stratification among places. It also entails dependency, uneven development, and the instability that results from lack of diversity in a local economy. According to many discussions from the critical perspective, capitalist development in rural areas offers little promise of either rural economic development or of rural community development. Instead, development is said to be of benefit to the urban-based capitalists and to the rural elite who, in collaboration with the urban elite and government agencies, maintain rural peripheries in a state of dependent underdevelopment to assure ready access to resources.

From either of these perspectives, there can be little doubt that rural areas face serious problems of community. In recent years, for example, findings have challenged the earlier assumptions that rural areas tend to have relatively low rates of such social problems as suicide and homicide. In fact, both of these rates (though not the rates of most violent crimes) tend to increase with the extent of rural settlement of local population when other important predictors are controlled (Wilkinson 1984b). While much work needs to be done to specify the empirical connections between these rates and the extent of community in a local population, a logical connection can be drawn by applying Granovetter's concepts. Both suicide and homicide as specific events point to problems of disruption in strong ties—suicide because isolation from intimate contacts is a key etiological factor and homicide because victims and offenders usually are not strangers to one another. Thus, disruptions in strong ties could result from the shortage of weak ties in rural areas; and the disruptions in strong ties in turn could contribute to the tendency for suicide and homicide rates to increase with ruralness. Isolation thus threatens well-being in predominantly rural communities.

When the barriers to community interaction are reduced in either rural or urban settings, the quality of life tends to increase. This is seen in material changes but also in changes in the warmth and mutual regardingness of local social interaction. In rural areas, the principal barriers to community interaction are deficiencies in resources for meeting needs and inadequate social infrastructure of services, associations, and channels for collective action.

As rural sociology is an applied enterprise, many students of the rural community are interested in promoting rural community development as well as in understanding it. An agenda for research on rural communities, therefore, can contribute to an agenda for policy. This study assumes that an important item on either agenda should be to examine the concept of community itself for cues as to how the phenomenon it represents emerges and develops. A parallel task is to understand the meaning of "rural" in modern society and the problems this adjective implies for community interaction. These basic issues for theory and research have direct implications for practice and policy. Community, rural well-being, and community development are, in the first instance, objects in need of sociological investigation; but they also relate to normative issues of continuing importance in society. A goal of the study, therefore, is to understand the community and its contribution to rural well-being so that this contribution can be encouraged in practice.

The following chapters elaborate this perspective. Using an interactional theory of community and social well-being, the objective is to identify challenges to and prospects for the community in rural America. The first chapter outlines the interactional conception of the community. The second chapter examines the properties associated with rural location that affect the community. These chapters draw insights from theory and research in the sociological literature, and they address major conceptual issues about community and about rural life, respectively, using the interactional concepts. The third chapter presents the interactional concept of social well-being, relates that concept to the notion of community interaction, and explores the effects of rural location on the specific community interactions that influence well-being. The fourth chapter then analyzes the purposive development of community as a strategy to enhance social well-being in rural America. This chapter reviews the principal components of the development of community as a process and comments on actions that would encourage and protect this process in rural areas. The concluding chapter (chapter 5) gathers together the several threads of the analysis, examines policy efforts to promote well-being in rural areas, and suggests ways rural sociology can support these efforts through research on the community.