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Small Town Kid in the Big City: Toward an Understanding of Rurality in Student Identity Development

Roman Christiaens

As intersectional identity frameworks urge student affairs practitioners to move toward a holistic view of the students we work with, it becomes evident that there are gaps in the literature regarding the ways in which dimensions of identity are culturally and contextually bound in place and time. These frameworks tend to minimize or ignore how students' identity development on a college campus is informed by the environment and influences of their upbringing. College students of rural upbringings are an often overlooked demographic in higher education, and thus can serve as a case study to begin addressing this gap in the literature. Drawing on the author's personal experience with rurality, this essay will seek to define rurality in higher education through a review of relevant literature in an effort to draw out a more nuanced understanding of student identity development.

Student development theory has made strides in understanding how a student's identity changes during the physical and social shift of college transition (Evans, Forney, Guido Patton & Renn, 2009). The literature has yet to study how a student's identity development in college is informed by the social and cultural location of their upbringing. For example, how would the development of a student from a rural town attending an urban private institution differ from that of a student from an urban area attending a large public institution in the Midwest? How would this development differ when additional identity dimensions are taken into account? Are there commonalities within the geographical positioning of a student's upbringing?

Rural students are a highly overlooked demographic in the field of higher education. The low rate of rural student college enrollment and degree attainment has been well-documented over the years (DeYoung, 1994; Hu, 2003; Young, 2002; Maltzan, 2006). Outside of this deficit perspective, rural students' experiences have neither been extensively researched nor studied. Part of this literature gap

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has to do with the slipperiness of the term *rurality*, which relies heavily on U.S. Census data and cultural stereotypes. With these unique characteristics in mind, the rural college student experience can serve as a case study for better understanding the role of upbringing in student identity development. By combining a review of relevant literature with the author's experience as a White queer rural student, this essay will attempt to capture the complexity of rurality in higher education and expand our understanding of student identity development.

Defining Rurality in the United States

The notion of rurality is a multifaceted concept about which there is no universal agreement or definition; defining rurality often relies on stereotypes and experiential accounts of small town America (Maltzan, 2006). The term suggests bucolic landscapes, unique demographics, isolation, low population density, and distinct sociocultural patterns (Hart, Larson, & Lishner, 2005); these aspects of rurality, however, fail to completely encapsulate what is considered rural within the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural areas as all populations, housing, and territory consisting of 2,500 people or less. With this definition, the 2010 Census established that 19.3% of the U.S. population are considered rural (Defining the Rural Population, n.d.). In terms of education, approximately one third of secondary schools in the United States are rural, and over 20% of the nation's students are educated in rural schools (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010).

Data on rural communities indicates that they tend to be racially homogenous (Handke, 2012), include higher rates of poverty (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012), and have poor access to comprehensive health-care (Hart et al., 2005). Rural residents are less likely to be college educated compared to urban residents (Demi et al., 2010). These characteristics support the generalization of rurality as connected to an isolated community with a struggling economic climate and limited educational opportunities. These characteristics do not fully account for the wide variation of rural communities. For example, the sociocultural characteristics of a predominantly White coastal logging town are going to look vastly different from those of a small Alaskan Native community in the state's mainland. Simply relying on a demographic and sociocultural mapping of rurality leaves a much-desired view of the concept, and it becomes necessary to explore whether there are shared commonalities in the lives of rural youth.

The Rural Deficit

The majority of research regarding rural youth has revolved around what has been termed as the *rural deficit* (Maltzan, 2006). The rural deficit refers to the fact that rural students are less likely to pursue higher education, less academically

prepared for college than their urban peers, and experience high attrition while in college (DeYoung, 1994; Young, 2002; Hu, 2003; Hart et al., 2005; Demi et al., 2010; Byun et al., 2012). These findings affirm the observation “that urban and suburban children appear to aspire, achieve and develop above and beyond rural children in their educational pursuits” (Maltzan, 2006, p. 32). Research on both pre-college factors and the likelihood of degree attainment shows a direct connection with the lack of rural school resources, proper college preparation, the level of parental education, family socioeconomic status, and the involvement of rural students in their local community (Byun et al., 2012).

In addition to the rural deficit, rural students embody a variety of social identities and face different barriers to higher education depending on their geographical location. Rural students who are first generation are doubly marginalized by their lack of awareness and knowledge of higher education and are less likely to receive this knowledge from their families or community (Schultz, 2004). Race remains a prevalent factor in college enrollment and persistence. 18.6% of students enrolled in rural schools nationwide are students of Color, and the few studies conducted on these students show that they are less likely to experience educational advantages compared to their White peers (Beeson & Strange, 2003). In terms of socioeconomic status, the average per capita income in rural areas is about \$19,000, compared to \$26,000 in urban areas (Defining the Rural Population, n.d.). Finances are often reported as rural students’ biggest barrier to obtaining postsecondary education, and educational persistence is largely dependent on students’ financial literacy (Maltzan, 2006). It is important to keep these various identities in mind when considering the rural student experience.

Rural College Student Experience

Despite the apparent odds, there are rural students who aspire to attend and enroll in college. Of these students, one common finding is that once rural students leave for college, they are unlikely to return to their hometowns (Maltzan, 2006). The rural college experience has not been explored heavily in the field of higher education. Of rurality in higher education, Dietrich (1999) asks: “where does it fit in? What practical purpose does it serve? We must seek to elicit student descriptions of a ‘rural lifestyle’ and tap into their feelings about their own rural lifestyles” (p. 100). Two qualitative studies conducted within the last decade help to answer these questions and lay the groundwork for investigating the rural college experience.

In a dissertation study of nineteen students of rural upbringings who attend a mid-sized state university in west-central Missouri, Handke (2012) found that the students perceived their rural environment and upbringing as isolating. These students expressed a sense of having very little interaction with different cultures

and of lacking proper role models for college life and academic achievement. Handke's (2012) study also found a trend of collectivism in the student's desire for closer interpersonal and communal connections in college that reflect their hometown communities.

Schultz (2004) interviewed first-generation college students of rural upbringings while they were completing their first semester in college. Schultz's (2004) study identified the following commonalities of rural students in relation to their identity development process. These included: a lack of experience with the cultural diversity of a college environment, a desire to return home, disconnectedness and marginality, and a sense of pride and accomplishment as it relates to their college experience. The sense of disconnectedness and marginality is most notable, since the majority of rural students reported feeling a high degree of incongruence between their upbringing and the social and academic environments of college. The characteristics of college students of rural upbringings founded within the studies of Schultz (2004) and Handke (2012) help to flesh out how the environment and the influence of one's upbringing informs their identity development process in college.

My Personal Story

The paucity of research on rurality in higher education begs the need for more narratives of college students of rural upbringings. I would like to contribute my story as a way of demonstrating how rurality fits within student identity development. My earliest memories are filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of backcountry Montana. For most of my childhood, I lived with my parents and brother in a slightly rundown, one-story house on a dirt road, about fifteen miles from the local town. My father comes from a long line of wheat farmers and cattle ranchers, and he became one of the first in his family to obtain a college degree. During the majority of my childhood, our family struggled financially but was able to make the transition to middle class in my adolescence. My mother did not have a college degree, and my father has never lived outside a hundred-mile radius of where he grew up. I am the first in my family both to achieve an undergraduate degree outside of Montana and to pursue an advanced degree.

As for the small rural town I grew up in, the community was racially and religiously homogenous. I only remember two families of Color living in town, and no places of worship for non-Christian religions existed in the local area. The public school I attended was the only accessible option for secondary schooling; the school had poor resources for college preparation and only offered one college prep course to high school students. The closest comprehensive healthcare facility was approximately sixty miles from the town. While the per capita in-

come of my hometown is slightly more than the national rural average, finances certainly posed an obstacle in regard to where and how I would enter college.

My upbringing in rural Montana did not seem unique until I moved to the city of Seattle to pursue an undergraduate degree at Seattle University (SU). At SU, my rural upbringing became a very salient aspect of my identity. It deeply affected how I interacted with my peers, understood my own sense of self, and viewed the world. When I first transitioned to SU, common aspects of a rural upbringing figured prominently in my life. I quickly desired close interpersonal and community connections with others on-campus, I had very little experience with cross-identity and cross-cultural interactions, and my worldview was quite limited. While I was challenging the rural deficit by attending an out-of-state private institution, I still struggled to acclimate to higher education, in part due to my lack of institutional knowledge.

Within the first several months at SU, I felt alienated and misunderstood. I did not fit well with the “city kids,” and I rarely engaged with others across difference. In academic spaces, I did not feel intelligent despite my academic success in high school; this lack of self-confidence was owing in large part to the poor college preparation I had received in my high school. Above all, I tried to retain a certain sense of pride in being my family’s success story, and I disguised my personal struggles to those around me. In college, I battled with an overwhelming internal belief that I did not truly belong in higher education, and I tried to quell this by relying on a “bootstraps mentality.” While counseling services or student affairs mentors could have aided my transition, I was not sure how to access these services and opportunities.

My pathway to eventual college success was contingent upon the community connections I made through student leadership. After the first few months of struggle, I relied on a desire to be part of the university community and utilized my small town ability to connect with others in order to find Schlossberg’s (1989) coined concept of *mattering*. My eventual acclimation to SU was also influenced by my two other salient identities as White and queer. As a White student, it was easier for me to “fit in” at a predominantly White institution within a relatively diverse city; I was surrounded by people who looked like me. My rural town upbringing also taught me a sense of respectability and a naïve colorblind outlook of the world, which at first helped me to connect across racial difference. While my white privilege provided an easier pathway for college success, my white identity meant that others assumed I would naturally succeed and feel comfortable on-campus. In part, my white identity disguised the obstacles I faced and the needs I had as someone of a rural upbringing.

My queer identity was another story; I use queer here as a specific identity that

best reflects the intersections of my sexual desires, political views, and activism. I had no immediate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) role models or access to support services throughout my rural upbringing. Growing up, I never knew of anyone who identified as LGBTQ. It seemed to me that LGBTQ people existed only within an urban consciousness, and I did not think it was a possibility to be queer in a rural area. It wasn't until my transition to SU, where I met with other LGBTQ people, that I was able to finally claim a queer identity. The multicultural office at SU became a tremendous source of support as I made sense of myself and the world around me. Yet, even as I began identifying as queer, I was not able to envision how my rural upbringing and queer identity could positively intersect until after college.

Facilitated by cross-identity relationships and Women's Studies courses, my other two identities became more salient in later years of college. As I became involved in campus activities and student leadership, my rural upbringing carried less meaning for me. It was something I could ignore in this new city life—except, of course, when I visited home during break. Even though a rural upbringing was not as salient for me as I inched towards graduation, it still played an important part in my transition and acclimation to higher education. My rural upbringing also figured into my decisions of where I would be after college. Would I return to my community or continue living in the city? What were the ways I could give back to the rural community where I grew up? I still wrestle with these questions, especially as a second-year graduate student living on the other side of the country. Exploring two of my identities and their intersection with rurality affirms the fact that rurality is deeply layered in structures and meaning. It is “not only a product or set of attributes that [can] be claimed and neatly recorded, but more significantly, a process that [is] ongoing” (Maltzan, 2006, p. 216).

Revisiting Student Identity Development through Rurality

This snapshot of my personal story is meant to illuminate the obstacles I faced in higher education and the ways my identity development process was influenced by a rural upbringing. It is important to note that my experience of rurality is unique to myself, but it also reflects the current research on rural community trends, including the socio-cultural, educational, and economic realms. My story expresses major themes regarding the rural student experience: intersectionality or the ways that one's rural upbringing intersects with their social identities; the changing saliency of rurality depending on a student's location within the institution; rural student experiences of marginality and isolation in higher education; and the possibility of shared commonalities across the rural student experience.

The qualitative work of Maltzan (2006) suggests that “rural culture is internalized as a core sense of self, and rural identities are in process long before college-

bound students leave for higher education” (p. 222). Social identity is given meaning through interactions with others, and the nuances of one’s own upbringing are often mediated when engaging others across difference. My rural upbringing achieved greater salience and meaning when I engaged with others whose stories and identities differed from my own. Before college, I understood my rural upbringing as a part of my core sense of self, but during college, I also began to view my rural upbringing as a continual process that impacts who I am today and how I understand the world around me.

Student identity development theory has made great strides in trying to capture a holistic idea of how students develop. The work of Jones and McEwen (2000) with their model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) and the work of Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) with their reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI) are examples of this theoretical approach. MMDI and RMMDI attempt to encapsulate how students’ social identities and contextual influences—such as family background, peer culture and social norms—impact their core identity and the ways they make meaning of the world around them.

Rurality suggests that the lines between meaning-making, contextual influence, core self, and social identities are not finite or as clear-cut as the MMDI and RMMDI models seem to suggest. My personal story shows that the relationship between rural upbringing, a core sense of self, and social identities is a fluid and mutually exchanging process, rather than a direct correlation. By contributing my personal story as a White queer rural student to the literature, my hope is that rurality and specific aspects of upbringing will attain more significance in the field of higher education. Utilizing rurality as a case study urges the field to continue challenging and expanding identity models toward more inclusive theories of student identity development.

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