

Exploring Rural Community Agency Differences

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Overview

The role of community agency in the rural community and economic development processes needs to be better understood in America and other advanced, industrialized nations. Community agency is vital to protecting, retaining, and maintaining rural communities. A comparative study was designed to explore the role of community agency in contributing to local well-being in Ireland and America. This role was evaluated through the use of a multiple method framework based on extensive key informant interviews, focus groups, and analysis of household survey data. Overall, the findings indicate social interaction was the most important explanation of community agency, followed by community attachment, social ties/networks, and sociodemographics. Important differences were noted between Irish and Pennsylvania respondents. In both nations, regression models indicated social interaction was the most important factor associated with community agency. Applied policy implications of these findings are advanced.

Implications for Research and Extension

This study was based on the premise that local residents acting together have the capacity to improve local well-being. Overall, the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of residents in the two nations were surprisingly similar despite important historical, cultural, and social distinctions. Regardless of differences in some conceptual areas identified in the analysis, social interaction was found to be the central element in community action for both nations.

The significance of social interaction in this study supports previous research. In all of the communities studied, those residents who routinely interacted with others on a non-required basis were more likely to be active in their communities. Applied uses of these findings could take the form of linking community development efforts with social groups, clubs, and organizations in which residents freely participate. These organizations could be made aware of community needs and encouraged to have outreach programs that partner with community action groups. Through these groups, members could be encouraged to take part in or support additional community wide efforts. Further, local groups and clubs could nominate members to represent their particular group on broader community development programs/committees.

Equally important, enhancement and promotion of venues for social interaction should be seen as a priority. Such venues can take a variety of physical and social forms. Included are the establishment of community centers, town halls, parks, and other facilities open to all residents and which serve as a location for a variety of services, functions, and events. These venues could provide an environment where residents can meet, interact,

and discuss general issues relevant to the entire community. Planned community wide social events can also serve as a useful venue for interaction.

The findings of this research suggest that social interaction is a vital part of community agency, and consequently, the development of community. However continued research in more diverse areas will be needed to better evaluate the factors that explain how and why rural residents come together through community agency. This understanding and advancement of theory is critical to the empowerment of rural people and communities. It is this ability that allows rural residents to organize and enhance their capacity for locally based decision making and development while contributing to the general needs of their community.