

The Relevance of Community Sentiments to Australian Rural Youths' Intention to Stay in Their Home Communities

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This study explores whether community sentiment factors can mediate structural disadvantage factors in rural youths' intentions to stay in their home communities. In total, 3,023 Australians ages 13 to 18 years responded to items assessing community sentiment (belonging, sense of community, and social support) and subjective quality of life. Structural disadvantage was represented by population size. Participants responded to "If I could get a job here or go to University/College here, I would choose to stay in this town for the foreseeable future." Findings indicate all factors had a positive relationship with intention to stay; however, only belonging partially mediates the effect of size of community. The combined effects for all factors account for 19% more of the variability in intention to stay than the size of community alone. Discussion considers how focus on structural factors alone restricts the understanding of push-pull dynamics facing rural youth.

Keywords: *rural youth migration; community sentiment*

A belief commonly espoused within the rhetoric of rural community discourse, political and popular, is that youth are the future of the community. Hence, the loss of young people from the social and economic fabric of a community raises sustainability concerns from many sectors. For although the renewal of rural settlement is evident, with newcomers seeking inexpensive retirement options and lifestyle changes, such a demographic shift initiates changes in the identity of the community

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and the social meaning of its geopolitical space (Berry, 2000; Brown, 2002). As more youth leave small towns, they take with them some of the town's identity related to their generation, in addition to their energy and ideas. There is concern in Australia that such change affects the everyday life of rural residents. It threatens a significant source of the national identity. It also exacerbates, at a psychological level, the distress experienced at an economic level (Lockie & Bourke, 2001). As stated by one grazier, "If the young people aren't going to stay, who are we working for?"

In Australia, the politics of managing the regional "sustainability crisis," in terms of the exodus of young people from the "bush," have focused on addressing structural disadvantage, particularly education and employment. One strategy has been supporting young people "boarding" in urban centers in anticipation that they will return to their rural roots on graduation; however, in most instances, they do not return.

The emphasis on aspects of structural disadvantage is understandable and publicly defensible given their visibility and empirical evidence of the importance of education and employment opportunities in young people's migration decisions (Eversole, 2002; Lockie & Bourke, 2001). However, not all youth respond to structural disadvantage in the same way; there are some that stay. The education and employment focus of research to date represents a particular structural and economic definition of community and understanding of migration. It does not encompass factors related to the psychology of community, or young people's relationship with their community of origin, discussed herein as community sentiment. The purpose of this article is to present a snapshot of how young people across a broad spectrum of rural Australian towns feel about their home communities. We aim to explore whether their perceptions of belonging, sense of community, and support mediate the importance of structural factors, implicated in size of community, in their intentions to stay in their rural towns.

Migration Factors Considered

Although there are many variations on models for understanding migration decision-making processes, the classic push-pull model (Lee, 1966) is the foundation for most. It identifies factors considered in the migration decision as those that "push" people somewhere else in search of necessary resources such as jobs and those that "pull" people somewhere else with opportunities such as lifestyle changes. This has also been described in terms of the push of the current residential location and the pull of the destination (Stimson & Minnery, 1998). However, the psychological experience of deciding to leave one's community is not a singular consideration of going or staying but rather, one of being pushed and pulled in two directions simultaneously. This is another way to interpret a push-pull model of community relocation decision making: the dynamic movement between reasons to

leave (e.g., push factors such as economic problems, availability of services) and reasons to stay (e.g., pull factors such as neighborhood relations and kinship). This is how we use the push-pull framework in this study.

To understand rural youth out-migration, researchers have identified mostly push factors, although the push-pull model was not used in these instances. As in research regarding adult migration, this includes mostly structural/functional factors, such as lack of education, employment, and occupation opportunities (Cadwallader, 1992; Eversole, 2002). Individual difference factors include developmental processes of leaving home to establish independence (Jones, 1995) and orientations toward a desire for change (McAndrew, 1998).

However, less exploration considers what Longino (1992) and Moon (1995) have called “moorings,” those relational group dimensions that pull people to make decisions based on values of family, history, and culture. Some such factors have been investigated with young people, mostly relationships with kin (Elder, King, & Conger, 1996). There is little known about the pull of a young person’s relationship with the home community, the social-spatial context within which structural and individual difference factors are embedded. Exploration of these moorings, or experiences and perceptions of community, is the focus of this study.

Community sentiment and the rural hometown. This article uses *community sentiment* to label psychological dimensions of the relationship between residents and their home community; a term used by others in this area of study (Hummon, 1992; Stinner, Van Loon, Chung, & Byun, 1990). We recognize that *community* can have many definitions, including spatial and social elements, as discussed by Pretty, Chipuer, and Bramston (2003). In this article, we define it in terms of social relations situated within geographical boundaries that identify one’s home community (Hummon, 1992). Sentiment toward a community develops as a result of the interaction between people and between people and the physical place (Fried, 2000; Gustafson, 2000). We are interested in youths’ sentiments of belonging, sense of community, and support, as there is growing evidence of the extent to which youth develop these particular community sentiments and its importance to their everyday lives (for a review, see Pretty, 2002).

We do not assume that these community sentiments are inherent in rural town living simply because of small population size. Freudenberg (1986) critically reviewed previous research and investigated whether psychosocial factors were a consequence of population size, which he interpreted as an indicator of density of acquaintanceship. He concluded that relationships between size and psychosocial factors are attenuated by the availability of primary social supports, which he argued may be available in a town of any size. Freudenberg suggested that other variables in addition to population size influence acquaintanceship density, thereby tempering the assumption that a smaller community necessarily provides a better psychological environment; a smaller community provides just an opportunity to be better.

Indeed, findings from the few investigations of rural youth and migration reflect some of Freudenberg's (1986) conclusions. These findings also indicate how support and belonging in a small town may be experienced as both push and pull factors. Some examples are provided from the following research.

Belonging. The work of Jones (1995, 1999) explores relationships between young people and their home community in rural Scotland. Interviews with young people reveal the role of the local community and its social and spatial characteristics in the development of youth identity. Jones highlighted the importance of belonging, which was defined as youths' overall experiences of inclusion and exclusion. These experiences were a consequence of interactions with community boundaries that were social, symbolic, and spatial. Jones's research describes the complexities of how youth experience small communities, where the very intimacies and familiarities supposed to generate and maintain belonging could result in experiences of exclusion rather than inclusion. In addition, costs of belonging were restrictions put on behavior seen to be different and unacceptable to the home community. This issue of residents' accepting diversity was recognized by Freudenberg (1986) as an antecedent to people taking up the opportunity for acquaintanceship offered in a town. Jones's findings point further to the complexities of understanding the connection between young people's sentiment toward their local community, its size, and their decisions to stay or to leave.

Social support—someone to talk to. The role of developing and maintaining supportive social networks is featured in much of the social-psychological research on migration. Few migration decisions are made in the absence of consultation with others (Brown, 2002). Accounts by young people of the "talk" occurring in the small Scottish towns in Jones's (1999) work indicate that conversations could on one hand represent help and support; however, they could also represent influence, interference, and intrusion. Hence, having someone to talk with, like belonging, may come at a cost and be experienced as push and pull when considering whether to stay.

Sense of community. Sense of community includes many aspects of the individual-community relationship; it implies emotional bonding as well as the giving and receiving of assistance among community members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Pretty and Chipuer (1996), described in Pretty (2002), interviewed more than 400 young people and concluded that youths' construction of sense of community was composed of these same dimensions. Pretty et al. (2003) explored the relevance of sense of community to the place identity of youth in two rural Australian towns. One question the researchers posed was whether a young person would choose to live in a different town. As expected, lack of access to resources and activities to meet developmental needs was most important in discriminating youth who preferred to stay from those who preferred to leave. Resources represented push factors.

However, after these structural factors entered the discriminant function, sense of community also entered as a significant discriminating pull factor.

However, having a sense of community can also restrict individual behavior, as it has a strong association with social control (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Again, this is consistent with Freudenberg's (1986) position that density acquaintanceships afford control of what is considered to be deviant behavior and appropriate socialization of youth. Indeed, some researchers have discussed the implications of a negative sense of community (Brodsky, 1996). On the basis of these research findings, a question regarding sense of community was included in this study to determine its push-pull relationship to migration intentions and to further explore its relationship to structural factors identified in Pretty et al. (2003).

Individual- and community-level structural resources. As indicated earlier, much consideration has been given to structural disadvantage and individual perception of this disadvantage in understanding youth migration. In this study, we address these factors from the following perspectives.

Subjective quality of life. Similar to the Australian context investigated in this study, Elder et al. (1996) studied youth migration in the rural Midwest of America. They uncovered a complex web of push-pull structural and individual factors relating to migration decisions. Young people's intentions were related to their prospects for a college education, socioeconomic disadvantage, ties to their family and their religious community, and general level of happiness with life. Elder et al. described the emotional dilemmas faced by rural youth who confront plans to leave home "with a relatively dysphoric outlook" (p. 420) as similar to those confronted by youth who faced the probabilities of future socioeconomic distress if they stayed.

Given the significance of individual perceptions of well-being to migration intentions, we chose to represent such perceptions in this study in terms of subjective quality of life. Subjective quality of life is commonly used to assess the combination of individual and community structural factors that together represent an overall sense of well-being (Cummins, 2000). Researchers such as Cummins (2000) emphasized the value of subjective measures as they are sensitive to individual differences in attitudes and behavior not always detected by objective quality-of-life measures.

Structural disadvantage. In Australia, the level of socioeconomic disadvantage, that is, the availability of education, social, health, recreation, and employment services and opportunities, is related to the size of the rural community. Systemic evidence of the relationship between population and disadvantage of rural towns has been described by analysts such as Beer, Stimson, and Baum (see Stimson, Baum, & O'Connor, 2003, for a review). We used the population of each

participant's residential community as an indication of the level of structural disadvantage likely to be experienced by participants. Given the range of population sizes of these communities (150 to 42,000), and the relevance of community size to understanding the complexities of community sentiments in rural towns (Stinner et al., 1990), we thought the use of size was appropriate to represent the independent variable of the research question.

Summary

We would like to reiterate that size of population is not assumed to reflect density of acquaintanceships or the prevalence of positive psychosocial factors such as social support and belonging. Population size is used here as an indicator of only structural disadvantage, and the community sentiment variables and subjective quality of life are explored with respect to mediating the relationship of structural disadvantage and migration.

The Study Site

Defining rural in Australia. Determining what is rural and "how do we know when we are standing in it" (Lockie & Bourke, 2001, p. 5) is very difficult but important if we are to appreciate the particular issues being raised in this article regarding the survival of rural towns. In Australia, which is one of the world's most urbanized but least densely populated countries, approximately 20% live in rural areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001) as defined by their geographic proximity to public services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). It is important to note that approximately 70% live within the district of a capital city. This leaves a wide range of characterizations of towns considered to be rural, from the more remote towns of less than 150 residents to regional centers of more than 90,000.

The region. The region of Darling Downs is situated midway down the east coast of Australia approximately 100 km west of the coastal state capital Brisbane. The Darling Downs encompasses 90,000 km² of rich pastoral and agricultural land. Although urban residences have been excluded from this study, the city of Toowoomba is the hub of commercial and industrial activity and the regional center (population 92,000). The area is the state's (Queensland) largest producer of agricultural produce.

The Darling Downs is made up of a number of 16 smaller rural shires. There are also two small townships (less than 30,000 residents) within the region that were included in this study. The total population (excluding Toowoomba City) is 203,000 as of the census of 2001. Of the adult population, 31% have completed high school, and a further 27% possess some postsecondary school qualification. The

unemployment rate is marginally higher than the national average at 6.8% (as of 2001). The median household collectively earns between \$600(AUD) and \$699(AUD) per week (marginally below the national average at the time). Of the population, 10% is aged younger than 15, and 13% is aged older than 65 (the median age is 34). In addition, 2.7% of the population are indigenous, and 7.5% were born outside Australia.

Purpose

We attempt to further demarcate the relative importance of structural disadvantage, subjective quality of life, and community sentiment (particularly belonging, sense of community, and support) in young people's migration intentions. Given the undisputed paramount importance of education and employment considerations, we purposefully removed participants' consideration of these factors in the intention question. Other than hypothesizing a relationship between structural disadvantage (as measured in terms of size of community) and intention to stay, we make no predictions as to the relative significance of the relationships of subjective quality of life, belonging, sense of community, or support to the intention to stay or as to the mediation effects of these variables on structural disadvantage.

Method

The Project

The opportunity for this study arose when a regional public health unit decided to offer a youth discount card to encourage participation in various local activities. The public health unit invited the researchers to include a few additional questions. Given the extensive distribution of applications for this card, and as opportunities to access youth across diverse rural towns within the one project were extremely rare, we accepted the offer. As the "youth exodus" from this region of Queensland was a growing concern, we decided to investigate young people's intentions to stay and whether there was an association between these intentions and community sentiments held by the young people.

Participants

The number of young people in the region applying for the youth discount card was 7,691; of this convenience sample, 6,376 (83%) answered the additional questions for this study. Their ages ranged from 10 to 32 years. Gender was not a component of the application for the youth discount card and, therefore, not available for this study.

Because the focus of this research was youth from rural communities, participants who could be classified as living in a community of more than 48,000 or who were older than 18 were omitted. The final data set retained 3,023 participants, half of whom live in communities smaller than 8,000 residents. We estimated that this convenience sample represented approximately 62.8% of the total comparable population (approximately 4,812 youth aged 10 to 18 in the same region based on the census of 2001).

Materials

Because of space restriction on the form to which we were adding our questions, only a few key items could be accommodated to represent community sentiment and quality of life. The validity of these findings, therefore, rests heavily on the validity of these questions.

The principle question of interest in this study is the intention to stay in the rural town captured in the statement "If I could get a job here or go to University/College here, I would choose to stay in this town/city for the foreseeable future." This item was chosen from the Pretty et al. (2003) study described above. It was modified by including the preamble "If I could get a job here or go to University/College" to remove these structural resources from participants' deliberations on the migration intention question.

To assess the relationship between community sentiment and migration intention decisions, four additional community-referenced measures were considered for inclusion in this study. As space on the questionnaire would not allow inclusion of the full scales, or even subscales, a single item was selected. In each case, participants were asked to rate the statement from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

First, participants rated an item designed to reflect community support (Chipuer et al., 1999). Their data, based on 464 rural youth aged between 10 and 18 years, indicate that one item correlated with the community support more highly than any other item ($r = .72$); this item was chosen for inclusion in this study with a slight adaptation of wording to "When I need someone to talk to I can usually find a person to help in this town/city."

The second and third additional items were designed to reflect belonging and a sense of community, adapted from the Neighborhood Cohesion Instrument (Buckner, 1988). This measure was used in the Pretty et al. (2003) study and their data indicate that two items correlated highly with the scale score ($r = .70$ and $r = .79$, respectively). These items were selected for inclusion in this study adapted to "I feel like I belong in this town/city" and "I have a sense of community amongst people who live in this town/city."

The fourth item was chosen to reflect general quality of life. The Comprehensive Quality of Life Scale (Cummins, 1997) is a widely published measure with

Australian normative data. This scale was used by Chipuer, Bramston, and Pretty (2002) in a study with rural youth. Their results show that this item correlated with the scale score more highly than any other item ($r = .80$). This item was adapted to "I am satisfied with my life at the moment." Individual well-being or subjective quality of life has often been measured by means of simple one-time self-reports consisting of single-item or multiple-item scales that ask respondents to reflect on how happy they are.

The questionnaire also asked participants for their address, which in most cases included their postal code (zip code). This postal code was cross-referenced with the 2001 Australian Census data publicly available for each postal code area. In this way, the size of the community in which each participant lived was determined.

Procedure

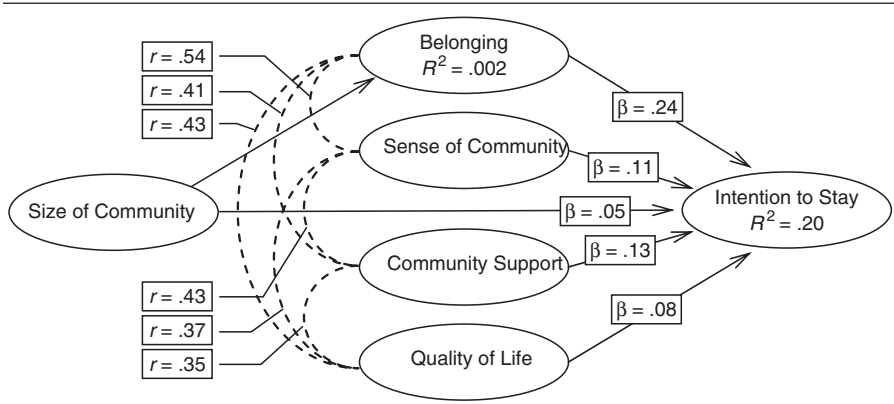
The questions for this research were located in a separate section of the application form for the youth discount card. An introduction to the questions indicated they were related to a research project being conducted in partnership with the University of Southern Queensland. Applicants were not required to complete these questions to qualify for a card; hence, participation in this research was voluntary. Application forms were supplied to schools, colleges, universities, shops, and malls across all towns in the Darling Downs region. Individuals returned their application by mail either individually or in class groups.

Results

Before assessing any possible mediation effects, we wanted to be sure that the three individual items measuring belonging, sense of community, and community support were not in fact one component. An exploratory principal components analysis was conducted and initial statistics indicated one latent root with an eigenvalue greater than unity. However, this emergent structure was discounted as spurious given that parallel analysis (O'Connor, 2000) indicates that the structure was not above that expected by random occurrence. The three constructs, therefore, were considered separate for further modeling.

To assess whether belonging, sense of community, support, and quality of life mediated the impact of the size of the community on youths' intention to stay, we followed the procedures set out by Baron and Kenny (1986). Figure 1 illustrates that size of community is associated with sense of belonging ($F = 6.41, p < .05, 1 - \beta \approx .99$), although this effect size was small ($R^2 = .002$). The size of community bore no significant relationship with sense of community ($F = 1.26, p > .05$), support ($F = 1.97, p > .05$), or quality of life ($F = .04, p > .05$). Sense of community, community support, or quality of life, therefore, cannot mediate the effect of size of

Figure 1
Youth Experiences Mediate the Effect of Size of Community on Intention to Stay



community on intention to stay, although there may be a simple main effect for each on intention to stay.

The final part of the analysis involved a hierarchical regression to determine whether size of community could explain any more of the variance in intention to stay once the effect for sense of belonging was controlled. Figure 1 also illustrates that sense of belonging ($F_{\text{change}} = 4.65, R^2_{\text{change}} = .002, p < .05$) partially mediates the effect of size of community on intention to stay. Although the degree of mediation is small, the combined effects for size of community, belonging, sense of community, support, and quality of life account for 19% more of the variability in intention to stay ($F = 123.00, R^2 = .20, p < .05, 1 - \beta \approx .99$) than the size of community alone.

Furthermore, beta weights indicated that size of community, sense of belonging, sense of community, community support, and quality of life all had a positive relationship with intention to stay. In other words, the larger the community (less structural disadvantage), or the higher the sense of belonging, sense of community, community support, and subjective quality of life, the greater the intention to stay. Partial and semipartial correlations are also presented in Table 1. Although all the independent variables were mildly negatively skewed (see Table 1), these findings were not eroded by marked distortions in normality, linearity, or homoscedasticity of residuals. Nor was multicollinearity evident.

It is notable that descriptively, the youth in this study appeared to be more satisfied with their lives (mean = 81.6% of scale maximum) than the general population at between 65% and 75% of scale maximum (Cummins, 1998). In fact, only 5.1% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I am satisfied with my life at the moment."

Table 1
Correlation of Independent Variables and Dependent Variable
Intention to Stay

	Zero Order	Partial	Semipartial	Skewness
Belonging	.39	.20	.19	-.86
Sense of community	.33	.11	.10	-.70
Population	.06	.05	.05	
Community support	.31	.12	.11	-.97
Quality of life	.27	.07	.07	-1.17

Discussion

This study constructs the “rural youth exodus” in the Darling Downs in terms of the relational aspects of community, in addition to the provision of structural resources (education and employment excepted), and subjective quality of life. The findings lend some support to the contention that young people’s migration intentions need to be considered in terms of not only the push of structural disadvantage but also the pull of community sentiment, particularly the feeling of belonging.

The findings indicate that for this sample of young people, structural factors alone, indicated by size of community, were not practically significant in their relationship to intention to stay, although they were marginally statistically significant.

It is also interesting that size of community is marginally related to belonging and not related to sense of community, community support, or quality of life. This finding reflects Freudenberg’s (1986) contention, as well as the position of some researchers, that “smaller is better” is a myth when it comes to the quality of rural community life of young people (Jones, 1999).

The results indicate that inclusion of young people’s self reports of belonging, sense of community and support would offer additional information to any project concerning “youth retention.” However, given the high degree of association between these constructs evident in this study, and discussed by others (Pretty et al., 2003), we are not maintaining that assessment of youths’ community sentiments should focus necessarily on these particular dimensions. They contributed significantly to understanding intention to stay as a collection, which suggests further work in this area should expand the parameters of community sentiment in anticipation of strengthening its relationship to migration intentions. To the extent that community sentiments such as these may be considered attitudes (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), models of the relationship between attitudes, intentions, and behavior, such as the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985), may prove fruitful in untangling the relationship between push and pull factors.

Limitations of the Study

As indicated earlier, the measures used in this study were substantially limited in scope and depth because of its development as a study of opportunity, piggybacked on another community project. This study uses individual survey items in the same way most studies use subscale or scale scores. Although these items did correlate highly with the scale score of the dimension they were designed to measure, they cannot reflect every aspect of the constructs we explore in this report. Some caution in the interpretation of these concepts, therefore, is warranted. Nor can a survey design establish any causal relationship between these constructs. Nevertheless, the relatively large sample size does allow us to reliably detect apparent associations and accurately ascertain an experiential profile among these rural Australian youth.

The minimal relationship between structural disadvantage and intention to stay may also be a result of the measure used. The responses to the intention question assuring employment and education opportunities may indicate the paramount importance of these factors such that other structural facets of living in a small town were inconsequential to participants' intentions. Further study is warranted to better scrutinize the components of structural factors important to youth.

One characteristic of this sample of young people was their considerable satisfaction with their quality of life. As the survey was distributed through all possible community settings as well as schools, we have no reason to believe our sampling method itself was biased. Although our participants consisted of 60% of the population in the districts sampled, it may be that we have heard from only a homogeneous select group of young people in the region. This limits any conclusions we might draw to those who do not perceive their everyday life to be disadvantaged.

Implications for Community Development

The findings encourage communities to value and nurture that which generates a sense of belonging in its youth, as the pull of positive community relationships may offset some of the push of structural disadvantage. The findings suggest consideration of how the youth exodus is implicitly constructed in any community's efforts to address the problem. The issues identified here are more complex than those suggested by analysis of educational and employment resources only. The generation of community sentiment demands ownership and action by the community as a whole rather than by a government service department alone. The concern is to support young people in rural towns by investing economic capital to develop structural resources and by investing social capital to realize a sense of community and belonging, to develop moorings.

At the time of writing this article, a few of the rural towns represented in this research launched initiatives to engage young people in "sustainable rural communities programs" being promoted by the state government. These initiatives go

beyond the token representation of young people on councils associated with local governments. Rather, engagement in discussion of issues such as alternative industries, salinity, water rights, and tourism is giving youth some participation in decisions that will shape their communities. As a result, they may choose to be moored rather than “retained” in their hometown. Hence, they may choose to stay rather than leave, but if they leave they may choose to return. This is the subject of our ongoing research with Australian youth from “outback” origins.

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