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The Politics of Aging and Rural Social Services: An Exploratory Analysis¹

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Let us agree from the very start to set aside the one topic that is most frequently heard at meetings on rural social work. I would hope that we might all simply agree that there are important qualitative and experiential differences between what are conventionally called urban and rural life in America and let it go at that. My concern here is not with how politics and social services in rural areas are different from those in cities. That is essentially a topic for comparative analysis. I am concerned instead with a straightforward, descriptive account of events and trends related to this topic in rural areas – small towns, villages, ranch and farm country in particular. Political and social service activities by, and in behalf of, older people in rural areas are, I believe, a topic worthy of discussion in their own right and do not need any comparisons with urban areas to justify them.

Assumptions

In pursuing such a descriptive, non-comparative approach to this subject, we can also state certain assumptions in a strictly qualitative, non-numerical manner: Let us assume that (1) there are a substantial number of small towns, farms, ranches, mining camps, fishing villages, pueblos, migrant labor camps, reservations, rural communes and other small-scale human settlements in what we call rural areas in the United States today. (2) Old people in such settlements can be defined qualitatively as those who have adult children or are age peers with those who have adult children; and (3) federal and state legislation for the aged explicitly and implicitly extends “parity” coverage to most rural older people. That is, rural older people are, in principle, entitled to their fair share of services and benefits, however difficult that may be to define operationally, or whatever that may be determined to be.

Social welfare politics in rural areas of the United States have since the days of the agrarian reformers encompassed two very different strains of activity. On the one hand, there are those advocacy efforts such as support for Social Security legislation and amendments, and the current and previous national health initiatives. These are activities that everyone generally recognizes as politics – election of officials, campaigning, political parties, interest groups and all the rest.

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At the same time, there is a level of non-partisan or civic politics of social welfare involving appointed rather than elected officials, volunteers, community leaders and others who are not explicitly recognized as politicians. This latter form of civil politics has existed more or less continuously during the 20th century in both rural and urban areas, albeit often in dramatically different forms. It is this civil politics that is the central topic of this paper.

The American Welfare State in Rural Perspective

Given these assumptions, how do the emerging system of social services and the political forces which support it appear from a rural perspective? It is my purpose here to suggest a few hypothetical answers to this question. But first we need to take a quick look at social welfare ideology as it has developed in this country. From the end of World War II through the reapportionment of state legislatures in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling in *Baker vs. Carr* (1962), one of the most common arguments for federal social action was the necessity of such action created by the negative political setting of rural-dominated state and local governments. Social services arose in the United States, according to this view, out of the urbanization and industrialization of American society (Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965). From this point of view, ruralness was often treated as a particular form of villainy: “Rural domination” was virtually synonymous with inaction on the needs of old people the poor, mentally ill and other oppressed populations.³ A companion argument often advanced in the post war period was the view that rural areas had less need for organized social services because rural areas were characterized by stronger, more satisfactory mutual aid networks and kinship patterns, which (it was alleged) tended to break down in urbanization. This view of “urban social disorganization” was considerably weakened and undermined by a succession of urban sociological studies finding that such breakdowns did not automatically occur in urbanization and were often the result of thoughtless or poorly thought-through social policies (e.g., Gans, 1982).

Four observations can be made about this particular ideology, which was presented as received truth to many of us in our undergraduate and graduate training. First, it has proven to be *an ideology of political complacency*: Why, after all, should social workers and others be politically active when historical trends were strongly in their favor? Secondly, this view does not offer a very flattering portrait of rural older people and others, since it appears to present them as either active or willing supporters of backward-looking rural politicians who have proven to be the most retrograde forces in American political life., or as so uncertain of their own political interests that they can be easily tricked or duped into supporting those same retrograde politicians. Thirdly, this interpretation is, strictly speaking,

³ Note from 2019: Major facets of this particular popular construct are still visible in the urban-rural political splits evident in accusations of racism, liberal v. conservative, Red and Blue, Pro-Trump vs. Anti-Trump support, populism vs. progressivism and other dimensions of contemporary politics. That “old, white men” are often held up as a key dimension of support for President Trump and “conservatism” generally should also be noted.

counter-factual since it provides an elaborate rationale for why social services do not (and will not) exist in rural areas and are not even needed when clearly they do and they are!

Most importantly, however, the modernization argument for social services as it has come to be called is unable to explain the changes which have taken place in the political leadership and support for aging services. For example, why did so many antagonistic rural politicians suddenly see the light and begin declaring their support for services for older people after 1970? The fact that such support in many cases cost them nothing politically, together with the widely prevalent belief among American politicians that old people represent a potentially powerful voting block may have something to do with that. Whatever the reasons however, one of the most noteworthy political events in rural America today has been the emergence of new political leaders interested in and willing to represent older people across a wide spectrum of issues and in a variety of forums. One of the most interesting facets of this development has been the succession of leadership styles among rural community leaders speaking for the aged.

While presentation of the actual words and deeds of these leaders is the work of historians and would be a task of enormous complexity and subtlety, we can make some broad and general observations about the matter. It would appear, for example, that we can single out four distinct phases in leadership style found in many communities in rural America – the pre-organizational, the grantsman or leadership planner phase, the organizational or managerial phase and most recently the advocacy phase. Further, we can relate each of these styles to the goals, organizational structures and power relationships of the aging agencies in local communities.

The Succession Model

Studies of leadership in the social sciences tend to follow two general approaches. One is termed the traits approach and tends to deal with the subject in terms of the characteristics which differentiate leaders from followers. The other approach, the situational, tends to focus on the social factors which bear upon leaders. The approach taken here is essentially situational. Leaders are defined as those who speak for, or in the name of an organization or a set of organized interests. Leadership style, as the term is used here, has to do with the characteristic manner of action displayed by leaders.

Prior to the Older Americans Act of 1965 there is little evidence of any large-scale development of organized social services for the old in rural communities. It would be a mistake however to assume that recognition of the social problems of older people was completely lacking in rural America. In the documents of the 1950 and 1960 White House Conferences on Aging, as well as in numerous minutes of public bodies one can find evidence to the contrary. At least since the end of World War II and probably much longer local citizens in communities through the nation were troubled by what they saw of conditions among the elderly, and sought to

bring those conditions to the attention of local politicians and civic leaders. After the fashion of Dorothea Dix's memorials to state legislatures, such reports most frequently took the form of letters to local newspapers, uninvited testimonials before town councils, county governments and in other public forums.

In general, such leaders were self-appointed, relatively isolated from local political forces, and by and large ineffectual. Most rural communities simply lacked the wherewithal to adequately support problem solving in the period in question. Such efforts can be characterized as pre-organizational in the sense that there is no evidence to date to suggest any political or social movement-type activity anywhere in rural America coinciding with or resulting from these individual acts of leadership. They were, in brief, leaders without followers.

In a number of instances, however, such pre-organizational leaders were ready and quite willing to participate when state and federal funding began to be available in the mid 1960s. However, where these early advocates for the aged were enlisted in the formative stages of what is now known as the Aging Network the dictates of the situation in which they found themselves radically modified the nature of their efforts. In this leadership planning era, the same opinion leaders were likely to find themselves involved in grant writing, forming committees, writing program proposals, hiring staff, setting policy and less and less involved in their former publicist roles.

Creation of organized agencies to deliver social services to older people, however, also brought about a major transformation of the newly energized local aging leadership in many communities: What may have been initially a common group with a common set of interests divided over time into paid employees and volunteers, each with slightly different perspectives and commitments. Further on, employees recognized that they were executives or staff, again each with differing leadership responsibilities and roles. One of these newly differentiated roles, as it has grown clearer and more distinct in recent years has led also to a third emergent leadership style: that of the organizational manager, concerned principally with maintaining the continuity of funding, agency policy, personnel actions and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of program performance. In many cases, this key transition could be clearly documented by reviewing the funding proposals submitted by agencies over the years. In many cases, one would find in the earliest cases general, somewhat vague, unprofessional-looking proposals possessing a great deal of enthusiasm and not much polish. These would be gradually replaced by more slick, error-free and "professional" proposals. Such documents would reveal clearly the transition from the leadership planning to managerial leadership styles in aging programs.

Finally, national and state attention devoted to age advocacy within the increasingly formalized and managerial aging network of local agencies is presently setting off a further transition among local aging leaders. In many cases what appears called for is a return to the earlier prophet-in-the-wilderness style advocate, except within the existing organizational structure of local service

delivery. While the general prospects for success in publicly-supported advocacy activities of this kind are not favorable, the generally positive high regard of American politicians for older people appears to be a factor very much in favor of these advocates.

Goals

Closely following this transition in leadership style with the Aging Network has been the gradual emergence of a set of narrowly defined, specific organizational goals reflecting the emerging service delivery system in aging. Initially, in the pre-organizational period prior to 1965 goals were less frequently encountered than problems. At village council, county commission and other meetings where the rural advocates appeared, one was most likely to hear general expressions of concern. "It's just so sad to see these lonely old people over at the rest home." "Why can't anyone do something about all the poor widows in this town?" And so forth.

Initially the task of the leadership planners was often one of adapting such pre-existing sentiments to grant guidelines and the interests of fund sources. More recently local agencies have undergone the transition to more managerial styles of leadership. As evidence of this transition, one can cite the emergence of management training, as well as interest in managerial techniques such as MBO, as evidence of this general government. It is probably also that evidence of the emergence of the advocacy style in local agencies will probably be found in the re-emergence of general goal and problem statements and expressions of the needs of the elderly in local newspapers and at various public forums.

Organizational Structure

A second related concern has been the persistent search among local aging agencies for an organizational structure which is an appropriate expression of the goals and purposes being pursued. In the pre-organizational phase, advocates for the aged seldom spoke for anyone other than themselves, either formally or informally. Leadership planners, by contrast, faced the delicate organizing problem of speaking for and representing, even as they were developing, organizations that often existed only on paper, and the challenging simultaneous problem of creating stable, viable formal organizations complete with staff and constituencies of supporters. Where it has emerged, the managerial style has been more frequently concerned with classical managerial questions of efficiency and effectiveness.

The question of an organizational structure consistent with the professed interest of aging advocates is a highly interesting one. Presumably, many local aging agencies will follow the lead of such national interest groups as the National Council on Aging (NCoA), and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and seek to be hybrid organizations with different departments devoted to member

or constituent services, advocacy and political activities as well as direct service delivery.

Constituencies and Local Power Structures

The three related variables considered to this point – leadership style, goals and organizational structures – imply or relate directly to another consideration. That is the question of the relationship to organized political power in local communities. From the days of the pre-organizational advocates for the aged, local aging agencies in many have truly “moved on to Main Street” and increasingly into the mainstreams of local political life in rural America.

It has taken a number of years for senior centers, senior aides projects, foster grandparents, nutrition centers, home health care and other local aging projects to become fully accepted as community social welfare institutions. In part, this is due to the relative slowness of change in rural communities. It may also be related to the continued growth of age-related problems over the past 15 years as older populations continue to grow rapidly in most rural areas.

It should be noted, however, that there has been a substantial shift in the nature of local political leadership in recent years. Many of the older, crustier politicians who ten years ago were howling about “creeping socialism” in the form of publicly funded senior citizens centers or nutrition programs are gone now, replaced by seemingly more moderate, socially aware local politicians.⁴ This is not entirely a matter of enlightenment, however. In a good many cases, the threat of “senior power” posed by local advocates appears to have helped many a foe of social programs for the aged to reconsider his views.

Conclusion

It would appear that the differing demands upon aging agencies during the phases of their development have resulted in differing expressions of leadership style. Such a succession of styles should be viewed as important in its own right, but also as evidence of the growing political viability of aging interests in many rural communities today. We must concur with the published literature on the subject, which generally concludes that aging has not yet emerged as a significant or powerful political interest in the United States. However, those who would speak for the aged have gone from being voices in the wilderness to proponents of the status quo, which now includes a significant number of community aging programs in little more than a decade. Further, the advocacy style of leadership could conceivably bring aging interests more directly into the mainstream of local political affairs than ever before. This would mark a major transition from the days when local political leaders constituted major obstacles to aging programs. It should not

⁴ (2019 Note): It has been obvious since the Reagan years in the 1980s that this statement was altogether too optimistic. Not only were the crustier rural politicians still there, they have been in the ascent for much of the time since.

escape us, however, that the nature of local rural political leadership has changed much over the past decade in many areas of the country. And, that fact alone may be related to the shift in aging political leadership.

Finally, the trend toward advocacy and the resultant shift in leadership styles bear continued watching over the next few years because they promise to be a major chapter in the impact of local political relations on local social welfare issues and concerns, as well as an interesting example of the changing rules and roles of older people in American community life.

Postscript (2019)

This article was based in large part on my personal “action research” involvements with rural aging services. This began as a newspaper reporter observing several formations of rural community aging groups. It continued in my roles as Director of a rural, small-town three-county Community Action Agency, and as a graduate student and young assistant professor teaching nonprofit management and social gerontology and, by the time of this paper, a consultant, management trainer and board member of aging network agencies in East Tennessee and West Virginia.

Although the “War on Poverty” was broad gauged and multi-faceted, with many different client groups and client populations, it very quickly became clear in my small, three-county patch of south-central Minnesota that aging services would be a far more important part of the challenge than the founding community leaders and I had anticipated. In pre-organizational mode and largely without grant support, but with verbal support from County Commissioners in two of the three counties, we organized Senior Citizen clubs and rudimentary organizations in at least a dozen communities. This was followed in short order by involvement in each of the other leadership stages discussed in this paper as well.

Because it was based in large part on my practical experiences, there was no effort to develop a full scale bibliography for the paper, which was published in the proceedings of the third national rural social work conference, a volume edited by my late colleague Barry Locke and myself.

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