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THIS IS WHERE I LIVE:
PHOTOVOICE AS PERSPECTIVE ON ADOLESCENT RURAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Place has a strong influence on identity development, and generalized places (urban, suburban, rural) can have consistent influences on the identities of those living there. Photovoice is a participatory image elicitation practice which involves engaging community members to critically assess their environment through photography. This study reviews three studies of rural identity attributes and creates a list of themes that appear consistently across the literature. A group of rural adolescents were recruited to participate in a photovoice project and follow-up interviews, and the study seeks to compare the themes emergent in their interviews and images with the themes gleaned from the existing literature. Comparing these sets of themes will provide a unique commentary on adolescent rural identity and present a subjective, participatory means of recording identity.

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I. Introduction

“Some places are really wide open - you don’t see houses for miles. I like it like that.”

Places matter. The notion of “the home” is central to many American ideas, from “finding one’s way home” to the importance of homeownership. People frequently discuss where they grew up, and can often offer explanations of its impact on their early life. Many people long to return to a favorite childhood place, a favorite vacation destination, or another place of special significance. Though places can be deeply personal (and no two individuals experience the same place the same way), generalized places can provide common meaning and identity. Residents of many cities can identify with the “hurried pace” and general congestion. In the same way, residents of rural areas share many common environmental traits, from more space to what many perceive as a “more relaxed” lifestyle.

The implications of these shared identity traits are important. By understanding the values and identity characteristics of rural populations, these populations can be better served. For example, public services can be more effectively allocated, and public health campaigns can be more carefully targeted. In addition, understanding the impact of rurality on identity increases the body of knowledge related to identity itself. While many methodologies have been used to analyze identity formation, this study uses participatory image elicitation to encourage participants to introduce their own discussion of identity, and uses a theme analysis to compare the participants’ comments with concepts from the existing literature on rural identity.

II. Overview

In order to fully understand rural identity, a review of the basic process of identity construction, the impact place can have on identity, and the existing research on the influence of rurality on identity is useful. From this research, a working list of themes can be synthesized that provides insights to compare with the data analyzed in this project.

The notion of “rural” as an influence on identity has its basis in the idea that locations can influence an individual’s conception of self. “Rural,” to the extent that it is a consistent spatial phenomenon, can exert this sort of influence on identity, leading to the notion of “rural identity.” Physical environment as an influence on identity development is described by the theory of “place-identity.” Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) present identity development as gaining the ability to “distinguish oneself from others” by sensory means, and add that this process of differentiating “is not restricted to making distinctions between oneself and significant others, but extends with no less importance to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found” (p. 57). In addition, identity is not constructed solely from the first-person perspective, but from the imagined perspective of others, resulting in the formation of an identity based both on what the individual is and is not (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 58).

As an individual becomes more aware of his or her surroundings and continues to assign him or herself distinguishing attributes, an enormous number of assessments may accrue. Proshansky et al (1983) describe place-identity as the “endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical settings that define and circumscribe the day-to-day existence of the person,” noting carefully that the memories which make up these cognitions are “selective and stylized” rather than objective (p. 62). Each cognition is assigned a positive or

negative valence, and Proshansky et al ultimately posit place-identity as a phenomenon occurring in individuals where cognitions with positive valence far outweigh those with negative valence (with “place aversion,” the opposite effect, occurring where cognitions are primarily negative) (p. 76). This suggests that though the physical environment contributes to every individual’s identity formation, only individuals who develop strong feelings experience place as a conscious contributor to identity, either as place identity or as place aversion. This also implies that, when researching place’s potential contribution to identity, it is important to understand not only an individual’s feelings toward a place, but also the valence of these judgments.

While place-identity may seem solely concerned with physical space, Proshansky and colleagues are quick to present it as inextricably tied to the social world. They assert “there is no physical environment that is not also a social environment” (p. 64). Just as it is impossible to conceive of a living environment not inscribed in some way by human influence, it is impossible to have physical space without social space, and social interaction (communication) is key to the development of an individual’s place-identity (p. 60). Developing place-identity “is not simply a matter of the child’s experience with his physical settings but clearly also a function of what other people do, say, and think about what is right or wrong and good or bad about these physical settings” (p. 60). Thus, the individuals a person shares social space with will have an impact on the conceptions that are adopted. In this manner, the social influence of people such as family members can create constructs that have some stability over generational time. This idea dovetails with Proshansky et al’s assertion that an important element of an individual’s “experience of environmental stability lies in the affirmation of the belief that the properties of his or her day-to-day physical world are unchanging,” which would be difficult to accomplish if

socialization with other generations is regular and generational spatial perceptions differ substantially (p. 66).

Theory on identity development has been applied to rural communities in various studies. Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland (2009) expand Proshanky et al's (1983) theories on geographic identity created through a message-mediated and constantly evolving place-centered construct and apply it to rural populations as marginalized communities. The researchers use the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004) to consider identity as centered around the personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames (p. 12), and purposely sought adolescents due to the importance of that phase for identity development and their lack of "choice over where they live" (p. 16). In addition to discovering a number of recurring themes in their analysis of the interviews, the researchers found space and place to be "intertwined in such a way as to exert mutual influence" (p. 16).

Another study on rural adolescent identity by Atkin (2003) seeks further understanding of the concept of "rural" in an attempt to inform government policy. Atkin argues in light of "the wide cultural differences and traditions which exist between and within societies" (p. 508), the rural population should "be considered a distinct ethnic group living within a society dominated by an urban majority; in consequence suffering elements of social exclusion often associated with other minority groups" (p. 507). Like Krieger et al, Atkin presents a number of themes central to rural identity as identified by his and other research, and the themes presented are remarkably similar despite the fact that Atkin's research was carried out in the United Kingdom while Krieger and colleagues performed their research in the United States. Though this

similarity may be unexpected, it is consistent with Atkin's notion of rural as a broad ethnicity (p. 507).

Krieger, Moreland, Sabo, and Katz (2010) present a third perspective on rural identity in a separate study. The authors identify and define five attributes making up the "rural prototype" based on surveys. Though these three works draw from different samples, techniques, and continents, the characteristics of rurality identified in each have notable similarities. By developing a list of similar traits from these studies, a working list of four attributes of rural identity can be devised and used for comparison purposes.

Space and Isolation

The concept of rural place-identity as involving large spaces or isolation is included at least once in each of the three studies reviewed. Krieger, Moreland, Sabo, and Katz (2010) categorize "remote" as their first characteristic of rurality and further explicate this construct as comprised of "isolation and land usage" (p. 1). Physical isolation is "defined as comments indicating that rural people were [physically] separate from and/or preferred to be physically separate from others," and better captures the consistent sense of "space and isolation" across the scholarship ("land usage" is more thematically consistent with "agriculture" in this analysis) (p. 1). Space and isolation also appear in Atkin's (2003) study. In the list of "six general characteristics of rural life and social structure," "isolated" and "small scale" are included (p. 511). "Isolated" describes rural individuals as "separated from services and amenities (also safer by dislocation from urban settings)," and "small scale" adds "small schools, small villages, small churches, small communities" (p. 511). Atkin brings a different perspective to his work by

focusing on education and social services, and while his definitions clearly reflect these concerns rather than specific identity concerns, they are consistent with the idea of “space and isolation.”

While Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland do not name a specific concept related to space or isolation in their review of “the rural context for communication,” (p. 6) the authors include references to Atkin’s finding that “individuals commonly used the term *isolation* to describe their communities” (p. 10). In addition, further scrutiny of the attributes that are identified reveals that rural isolation is coded into some of the attributes, with the construct “rural social networks” including the idea that “rural social networks tend to be restricted to a particular geographic region, such as an isolated town or community” (p. 8).

Strong and Important Relationships

A second attribute of rural life that appeared in each of the works reviewed was the importance and strength of interpersonal relationships on both the community and family level. Krieger, Moreland, Sabo, and Katz (2010) include “proximate interpersonal bonds” as a characteristic in their research, comprised of subconstructs “close family relationships” and “close community relationships” (p. 2). Both of these concepts were seen as vital to rural life, with strong agreement among participant responses. While Atkin (2003) does not include family relationships in his attributes, he does list “strong community feeling, friendlier than urban communities, more tightly knit” (p. 511).

Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland (2009) further define two features in this category: Rural social structure and rural family relationships (p. 6-7). Rural social structure includes a “high degree of familiarity and support” (p. 7), but also the threat of gossip and other negative

implications of too much interpersonal familiarity in a confined geographic space (p. 8). Rural family relationships, according to the authors, are constructed differently from other family structures, with individuals going beyond their immediate families to associate in “extended-kin oriented familism,” the inclusion of extended relatives who may live nearby to form a larger family support network (p. 8). The authors also found important specific implications for identity: “The adolescent narratives related to relational-enacted identity primarily consisted of talk about the importance of their families -- especially large and extended families,” suggesting that family may be the primary contributor to the relational frame of identity enactment (p. 24). By combining the perspectives of each of the studies, it becomes clear that strong social relationships between community members and families are a distinct part of rural life and an important element to consider. Rather than connected to a specific social group as urban individuals may feel, rural individuals feel a social connection with their entire community.

Rural Values

Each of the articles included some concept of cultural values unique to rural populations. Krieger, Moreland, Sabo, and Katz (2010) include a construct named “rural cultural values” which include traditionalism, “an emphasis on practical skills versus abstract knowledge,” a “friendly, relaxed, and self-sufficient demeanor,” and “strong religious and moral values” (p. 6). Atkin (2003) presents a related concept of “conservative and traditional values,” and a specific and distinct concept of “a slower, less pressurised way of life” that are consistent with Krieger et al’s (2010) analysis (p. 511). Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland (2009) also found tradition to be essential to the rural adolescents in their study, reporting “the most salient, positively valenced

future self in this group of adolescents was the desire to ‘stay the same’ in the future” (p. 24).

The importance of rural values across articles suggests that it is an important element of rural identity, and must be understood and approached if a researcher wishes to understand rurality’s influence on identity.

Agricultural Focus

A fourth theme was the importance of agricultural activity to rural identity. Atkin (2003) includes “a product of agriculture and its environmental activity” as a characteristic of rural life (p. 511). While the other scholars do not explicitly address agriculture, Krieger, Moreland, Sabo, and Katz (2010) introduce “working class” as an attribute to describe rural employment, including the factors of “physical, hard labor” (p. 2). Though it is broader than agriculture, this category would include farm employment. Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland (2009) include “rural education and employment” as a feature of rural identity, including “farming,” “forestry,” and “ranching” in their list of “traditional occupations” in rural areas, though they suggest that economic conditions have decreased opportunities in these sectors (p. 8). In addition, “remote” includes the theme of rural land usage, which “focused on comments related to the physical features of the rural environment” including “‘more space, ‘animals,’ ‘farms’” (p. 1).

Summary

Though no authoritative findings exist on what elements are specifically important for the identity development of rural adolescents, the three studies reviewed seem to reach a loose consensus on the four points above (space and isolation, strong and important relationships, rural

values, and agricultural focus). While two of the three studies are not specifically focused on adolescents and one is from outside the United States, the commonality of the four themes make them a good starting point for investigating the identity development of rural adolescents in the U.S. Additionally, though each hints at specific ideas, these themes are somewhat vague, and allow space for more specific patterns to emerge for the group being studied. Using these four themes, the researcher will focus on the content of the interviews recorded from study participants and seek to answer the question:

RQ: To what extent is each of the four themes important to rural adolescents?

III. Methodology

Photo Elicitation and Photovoice

Photo elicitation has been present in scholarship for more than fifty years. In its most basic form, photo elicitation involves “the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). The inserted image is used to “elicit” comment or insight from study participants in some way related to the content of the image. Beyond simply guiding the content of an interview, numerous researchers have found that photo elicitation has a positive effect on the quality of information provided. John Collier (1957), the first researcher to name photo elicitation, believed that the photos he incorporated into his interviews “sharpened the informants’ memory and reduced the areas of misunderstanding” (Harper, p. 14). Ultimately, Collier determined, photos “elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interviews” (1957, p. 858). Harper points to the brain’s physiology as the cause of these effects, suggesting that images “evoke deeper elements of human consciousness” and stimulate more of the brain than words alone (p. 13).

Photovoice is a specific type of photo elicitation pioneered in the 1990s by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris. Wang and Burris (1997) define photovoice as “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through specific photographic technique” (p. 369). Photovoice is a form of participatory photo elicitation in that the images used to elicit the effects first described by Collier (1957) are created by the participants themselves rather than introduced by the researcher. Photovoice is also targeted at social change: Wang and Burris (1997) define the three goals of photovoice as “(1) to enable people to record

and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs, and (3) to reach policymakers" (p. 370). Photovoice, therefore, seeks to harness the power of the recorded image to rally community support, enable community reflection and dialogue, and to serve as a vehicle for social change. The emphasis on participation also allows marginalized groups an opportunity to express their views, as "virtually anyone can learn to use a camera," and this ability to use a camera and the ability to communicate orally are the only skills required of photovoice participants (p. 370).

Data Collection

A media art teacher at a rural Pennsylvania high school was contacted and asked to allow her students to participate in the project. The school was identified as rural based on two main criteria: (a) The school district being located in a "rural" area as determined by the National Center for Education Statistics, and (b) the school's location in a county being considered "Appalachian" according to the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). With the teacher's consent, a researcher visited the school, described the project, and provided consent forms for the students to take home and complete within one week.

After one week, the researcher returned and collected forms from consenting participants. Each consented student was provided with a 27 exposure disposable camera and briefed on the basics of the research process. A total of eight participants completed the paperwork and participated in the study. Four of the students were male, and four were female. All eight were high school students living in the Penns Valley area of Central Pennsylvania, and all attended the

same school. The students were told they needed to return the cameras in two weeks, that the researchers would collect the cameras for developing and return to discuss the photographs with the students, and that each student would receive hard copies of his or her photographs. They were then introduced to the photovoice concept and the researcher and the students discussed different ways to think of “rural identity.” Two weeks later, the researcher returned to collect the cameras for developing.

One week after collecting the cameras, three interviewers returned to the school to interview the participants about their photos. One interviewer met with students in a private conference room, while the others shared a classroom. The interviewers used opposite ends of the classroom to enhance confidentiality. Audio recordings of the interviews were not permitted, so the interviewers took handwritten notes to document each of the interview questions. The interviews were built around a set of four questions for each photograph: What do you see?; What is happening in the photo?; How does this relate to your life as a rural teen?; and Why do you think this image is important? After conducting the first few interviews using every photograph the students took, the interviewers met and decided that they were quickly reaching saturation in the interviews and asked each remaining student to choose ten photos to discuss. A small number of the photos could not be developed due either to exposure issues or developing errors. As a result, the eight participants discussed a total of 93 photographs. Upon completion of the interviews, each student was provided with a set of his or her prints.

Data Analysis

The first step of the analysis of the interviews was transcribing the interviewers' notes back into the full sentences and phrases used by the participants. While this process necessarily involves some uncertainty, the majority of the notes were complete enough to make a full transcription with a good deal of confidence. Only responses that could be extrapolated into original responses with a high degree of certainty were quoted directly in this study. Those that could not be confidently transcribed are presented as paraphrases.

Once the interviews had been transcribed, they were coded according to the four themes identified in the existing literature. The eight students discussed a total of 93 photographs, and the individual interview related to each of these 93 photographs was treated as one unit for the limited qualitative analysis performed. A document compiling all 93 interview units was produced, and four separate copies were created, one for each theme. The researcher went through each document, marking any instances of comments relating to the theme as presented above. Once each document had been marked, totals were recorded for each student and the total (for example, five of one student's ten responses included comments pertaining to space and isolation, and a total of 47 of the 93 interviews contained these sorts of comments). Each theme was coded independently on its own copy of the compiled interview document without initial regard for how other themes were coded. Because of this, some interview units were coded on multiple documents: In many cases, a student's answer to one question for a particular photograph would include one theme, while the answer to another question for the same photograph would discuss a different theme. In the same way, a photograph could be coded at none of the major themes.

Once the four coded documents were produced, the researcher reviewed them, cross-referencing with the photographs the students were discussing for clarity. Notes were made on patterns emerging (or failing to emerge) in each major theme as it defined in the three studies reviewed above, and conclusions were drawn.

IV. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data provided valuable and unique insights into each of the themes identified in the literature. In addition, it suggested subtle relationships within the themes that may be unique to the participatory photo elicitation format. The four main themes above (space and isolation, strong and important relationships, rural values, and agricultural focus) were reflected in participants' discussions of the photos, and additional patterns appeared within each of the four main themes.

Space and Isolation

Each of the studies reviewed included an analysis of space and isolation as a cornerstone of the rural archetype, and it appeared often in the interviews. Though a majority of the photographs included elements of empty fields, mountains, or rural roads suggesting vast open spaces, the respondents often discussed items in the foreground or the personal significance of the particular location rather than explicitly discussing the openness of the space portrayed in the photographs.

A number of basic descriptions ("What do you see?") included items such as "field, isolated area" or "it's an isolated road, and it's very pretty," and the respondents went on to explain the scene as "something I see every day." Students focused heavily on including their everyday scenery, from roads they drive to fields and signs they pass on their ways to school. These open spaces make up the landmarks that are imprinted on students' consciousnesses as they view them repeatedly, and this level of awareness of space is readily accessed when they consider the images they choose to represent their rural lives. This emergent theme suggests that

space and isolation are important to the way adolescents see themselves as rural individuals simply because it makes up the scenery of their daily lives.

In other cases, comments on space connected to another element, such as a discussion of the farm in the image (agricultural focus) or the importance of its constancy (rural values). In this sense, it seems that much of the inclusion of open spaces in the photographs was a result of the fact that the rural area being studied consists primarily of open spaces. Any outdoor photograph, whether of a barn, a horse, a store, or a pond (all of which appeared more than once in the data), is likely to include a suggestion of open space in the background. In a strictly opposite sense, it would be difficult to photograph the essence of Manhattan without including the urban landscape in most or all of the images.

Though space and isolation appeared in photographs more often than it was discussed in interviews (47 of 93), it was a theme recognized in seven of the eight participants' interview sets. The words "isolated" and "space" both appeared specifically. For example, one student, described a scene as "a field, an isolated area," while another explained "if you live in a city you wouldn't have much space."

Despite this isolation, or perhaps because of it, the valences of the participants' evaluations of the space of their surroundings were positive. Open spaces were often associated with pleasing aesthetic qualities ("it's an isolated road, and it's really pretty," "open sky, everything is nice and clean," "beautiful sunrises, no buildings to block the view"). In addition, spaces were tied to the activities that they are used for. Participants discussed many of the photos of open spaces by explaining the activities they facilitate, including raising and riding horses, riding ATVs, hunting and fishing, and simply providing "good times" and "places to run."

Participants also commented on the relative advantage of having these spaces available, as “kids in more urban places don’t have any idea what acres they live on” and “probably have to go to a park to play, not their own yard.”

In addition to discussing the specific advantages afforded to them by the spaciousness of their environment, students also made positively valenced comments about their generalized surroundings. One student responded to a photo titled “Southern Part of a Field” by saying “I like where I live and how I live,” and another titled “Corn Field” by saying “some places are really wide open, you don’t see houses for miles - I like it like that.” Another respondent



Figure 1 “Corn Field”

suggested an untitled photo of a field, barn, and surrounding woods “symbolizes [his] life, and [he] wants it to stay the same and to cherish it.” More philosophically, spacious expanses were described as “relaxing, with nothing holding you in.” Overall, students reacted very positively to the open spaces around them. Based on Proshansky et al’s (1983) suggestion that place-identity occurs only in individuals with positively valenced cognitions of their environment, these statements suggest that these adolescents have the potential to develop place identity, though further exploration would be needed to verify this idea (p. 76).

While the open spaces of the respondents’ environments were associated with positive cognitions, the participants also suggested that they were isolated from their neighbors, and lived far from others. One student presented a photograph of an Amish farm, explaining that they were his closest neighbors but he “doesn’t see them around except sometimes in the yard.” Another photograph by another photographer “show[ed] how people are spaced out- it’s fifteen miles to the nearest gas.” A participant who described his environment as “spread out, not always right next to each other” echoed this sentiment. Another pair of images was devoted to a random flag and an abandoned, decomposing trailer in the woods. “There’s still junk in the middle of the woods,” the student explained, “people think nothing’s out there but there’s still a lot of garbage.” Comments such as these expressed or seemed to express a sense of disillusionment with the stereotyped wide-open and pristine spaces of rural living.



Figure 2 “Trailer”

Strong and Important Relationships

The concept that close interpersonal, immediate family, and extended family relationships are essential to rural identity was supported across all of the studies analyzed. A theme analysis of the interviews collected for this project reveals a similar pattern of emphasis. Participants discussed time spent with their extended families, and also commented on the longstanding family traditions involved, stressing the importance of traditions and activities with their immediate families. Less frequently mentioned but equally important topics included time spent with friends and relationships with neighbors. The strong and important relationships theme was coded in each interview at least three times, and appeared 41 times in 93 total interviews.

Time spent with extended family and the associated traditions appeared across the interviews, consistent with Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland's (2009) claim that rural identity is arranged around extended-kin ordered familism (p. 8). One participant explained that the traditions of area's annual farmers' fair, called the Grange Fair, were "passed down through generations," and included a photo of the house where her grandfather grew up. Another commented that his community's connection to the local church (which was the image he was discussing) is "generations" old, and also presented a photograph of his family's hunting camp, which has been "passed down from generation to generation from my great grandfather," and is a place where his extended family can gather and hunt together. Similarly, a student presented a



Figure 3 "My Camp"

photograph of her grandmother's farm, which has "been in her family for a long time." Another photographed a sunset from her grandparents' house, explaining that in the image they are "enjoying family time."

The prevalence of photographs and comments involving extended family suggest that this is a very important attribute to the participants' rural identities, and also correlates time with extended family with long-standing traditions, such as the family's enjoyment of hunting together in the lodge that has been passed down and all pitching in on the grandmother's farm that has been in their family for generations. This connection suggests that strong and important relationships and rural values have an influence on each other, which is consistent with Proshansky et al's (1983) assertion that identity development "is not simply a matter of the child's experience with his physical settings but clearly also a function of what other people do, say, and think about what is right or wrong and good or bad about these physical settings" (p. 60).

In addition to discussion of extended family, the interviews included discussion of the participants' immediate families that centered on family traditions and activities. A photo of a Christmas tree farm was explained as an annual family tradition, and a local pond provided a family fishing spot. Another participant included a photograph of a store her family started, which is connected to her house and is where she works. A photograph of a field represented where a participant rode horses with her father and participated in other activities like "shoot [ing] rockets off" or "flying kites." The same participant included a photograph of a tractor her father had let her drive with him when she was little, and explained show tractors are "a big thing in my family." A participant explained a turkey hunt as "a big part of what my family does," and



Figure 4“Family Store”

the idea of shooting their own turkey rather than buying one seemed very important to the student. The interviews uniformly suggested the adolescents value their families, with one respondent explaining “it’s family time at night, no one sneaks out.”

Friends and neighbors also entered the discussions, though not as frequently as immediate and extended families. Like immediate families, friends were usually referenced in terms of activities the respondents shared with them. “My best friend lives on a farm,” one explained, “and we go there a lot.” Another described fishing at a pond he photographed as “something to do” with family or friends. The Grange Fair grounds were included often, as many participants described how they and their friends look forward all year to the time they spend there. References to neighbors were often impersonal enough to be included in the space and

isolation category, but one participant elaborated on a photo of a nearby pond by adding that he “[knew] the guy who lives near it and owns it,” but doesn’t usually fish with him. While the research pointed to strong community relationships in addition to family bonds, the interviews did not include many references to specific community relationships that went beyond shared values.

Rural Values

While each of the studies reviewed included some discussion of a concept related to specific rural values, a definitive list of these values does not exist. Instead, they are operationalized as those values and preferences related to traditional, self-reliant, and conservative ideals. In coding the interview data, these themes appeared almost constantly (80 times of 93 total interviews). Considering the stated intent of photovoice as “to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns,” it is logical that constructs related to community values would appear very frequently in the resulting conversations (Wang and Burris, 1997). Despite the ubiquity, a number of specific patterns emerged in these discussions of rural values.

The most frequent comments by far were those related to traditions and consistency. Many of the participants discussed photographs related to the Grange Fair, the annual fair occurring at the end of each summer and celebrating the agricultural traditions of the area, from livestock to show tractors. The fair was described as something “everyone knows” and “looks forward to,” and “the highlight of the year.” It was also said both to “symbolize unity” and to “symbolize Centre Hall.” “This is my life,” another student explained about the fair. “Once you

go, you don't leave." "This is what makes Penns Valley Penns Valley," a respondent said of the fair, stressing it as the community's defining factor. Other appealing consistencies included scenery and landscapes, particularly those close to home. "I see this every day" was a consistent explanation for how an image related to a participant's life as a rural teen. The connection to consistency was sometimes even more explicit, with one student describing a photo of a field as "what I see every day, I would like this sort of country better than the city," and adding "I don't want it to change."

Comments on the unique characteristics of the area also appeared in the interviews. One participant photographed a tractor crossing sign, and explained that there are "probably not a lot of other places with tractor crossing signs in Centre County unless they're in Penns Valley," suggesting that the residents of Penns Valley perceive themselves as unique even from other residents of their primarily rural county. A respondent explained that she and her friends are "different from other kids," and when "other basketball teams visit, they think it's weird and cows smell weird." "We also sell beef," she added. The participants' constant comparisons to others their age in more urban environments ("I don't really mind that things are this spaced out - my uncle lives in Pittsburgh") also suggest that they have a conception of their community as unique.

The remaining comments on rural values covered numerous topics. One student hinted at a sense of permissiveness, trust, and responsibility when discussing his neighbor's fishing pond. "I fish there but not usually with the owner," he said, though they were acquainted. This seems to get at a complex relationship: Though rural adolescents are physically distant from their neighbors, they respect and trust them. Another student included a picture of an Amish farm next

to her house, and though she did not express any interpersonal relationship, she did suggest that the people of Penns Valley “respect [the Amish] a lot.” While Krieger, Pezella, and Moreland (2009) categorize rural social structure as having a “high degree of familiarity and support,” the photos and interviews also make a strong case that the sort of chance “mailbox meetings” that characterize many suburban neighborly relationships are not feasible with the space of rural areas (p. 7). One participant in the study presented many of his photographs as direct illustrations of rural vales. A photo titled “The Simple Things” includes a worn truck next to an old barn, and the respondent explained “rural isn’t all about new -- simple things work, like the old farm truck.” A photo of an American flag was explained as showing rural people are “more than just hicks, and patriotism is important to them.” When discussing roping cattle, another student said that her image showed “the hobby of Penns Valley: To work hard and have fun too.”



Figure 5 “The Simple Things”

While many of the specific values suggested in the existing studies were represented in this study, others simply were not. Conservative social values were rarely referenced (i.e., one mention of the photo of the American flag) and the only reference to religion was a photo of a church, which the participant admitted is “not huge with me.” While participants did seem to have many of the same rural values that were characteristic of adult rural populations, the participants in this study are both rural and adolescent. In the senses of traditional social and religious values, these interviews suggest that rural adolescents may have more in common with other adolescents than with older rural individuals.

Agricultural Focus

Agricultural focus was the least consistent theme in the studies reviewed, appearing explicitly only once. Despite this, the centrality of agricultural to the rural lifestyle was a major theme in the interviews. The agricultural focus variable appeared most often as a focus on animals, farms as employment and activity, and farms as landscape.

Animals appeared a surprising number of times in the interviews. Many of the respondents included photos of their or others’ animals or related infrastructure, and saw animals as very important to their community. A student presented a photo of two of her horses, explaining “I have horses -- a lot of people do. A lot of teens are in competitions with horses like English riding, barrels, and rides through the mountains.” She added “It shows how important horse riding is to the teens in this area.” Another student included a picture of his two horses, as it showed “we spend time with the horses and we ride them.” Animals also necessitate animal-specific community features: Two students included photographs of the local feed mill, and one

explained “animals and food for them are central to rural life. They give people jobs.” “Everyone has an animal that needs food,” the other stated.

As suggested by Atkin (2003), farms and agricultural activity are important to the economy in rural areas. Though most adolescents are not working full-time, farming and the tasks associated with it were still important themes in the interviews. One participant included a photograph of farm equipment similar to the equipment he used when he worked on a horse farm. “Farms are everywhere,” said another, “I work on a farm every summer.” Others did farm work with their families: “We all help out” on “my grandma’s farm,” explained a participant. Students who did not live on farms at all still felt connected to agriculture in their communities. “My friend is a farmer and many people are,” said a respondent. “Many people farm, and this [photo] represents that.”

Whether participants lived or worked on a farm or not, all could identify farms as an iconic visual element of their community. Fields and pastures appeared in almost all of the photos, whether as subject or as background. “I don’t live on a farm, but I see it daily, and it is different in each season,” explained a participant. “It signifies my life.” Another photo simply titled “Cows” related to the photographer’s life because she “sees them everywhere, and they are a symbol of Penns Valley.” Similarly, a field that is used for hunting, growing wheat and hay, and as a pasture for horses was said to “represent a lot of families in the area.” While not every participant lived on a farm, farms and farmland appeared constantly in their photographs and discussions, showing that farms are an important symbol of the adolescents’ community and a salient image in their consciousnesses.

V. Discussion

Overall, the thematic analysis of the interviews supports the importance of each of the four themes. However, this was not surprising, as the themes were not particularly specific. In addition to the more focused patterns within each theme discussed in the results (such as the prevalence of animals within agricultural focus), the project highlighted interesting results from the novel use of participatory image elicitation as a means to study identity.

A major advantage of the photovoice model for qualitative research is that individuals are not forced into means and regressions, but allowed to retain their unique characteristics. One participant, for example, focused extensively on rural values, including the theme in all fifteen of his interview units (the set of four questions asked about each photograph the student presented to the researcher). Other students focused their entire sets of interviews on other themes or topics. On a very basic level, this provides a reminder that while overarching themes can be discovered in adolescent rural identity, each individual is at a different place in his or her identity development and has different concerns and conceptions of his or her environment, even when two individuals share many of the same spaces. Strictly quantitative research often forces the opposite impression by emphasizing statistical consistency. The personal nature of the identity formation process was reflected in the consistency of the “this is what *I* like” and “this is what *I* see” comments, which are subtle but important reminders of this methodology’s ability to engage participants on a personal level.

In addition, the photos and resulting discussions provided unique and meaningful insights into the participants’ worlds. Rather than simply reading a respondent’s comments, the researchers had the images as an added dimension to aid in their understanding. Just as Collier

believed the use of images in the qualitative research process proved more stimulating for his participants, it can prove more engaging for those involved in research and analysis, and allows for illustrated findings. Despite the immediacy the images lend to qualitative research, however, it is important to remember that they are mere mediated reproductions of reality, not reality itself. This has two important implications: First, the images are mediated by limitations of the technology at hand. In this case, the cameras used limited students to outdoor photographs, and even these had to be in fairly bright sunlight. While more advanced equipment would have been less limiting, it would have been both very expensive and required substantial education in its use, which would add even more intentionality to the mediation of the images.

Second, it is important to remember that the images are always invisibly mediated by what the participants choose to photograph and by extension what they choose not to photograph. A set of photographs of any size could never be assumed to represent an individual's complete consciousness, much less a set of ten. Since the students anticipated one-on-one interactions about their work from the project's beginning, social desirability could have played a role in the students' selections and omissions. The fact that only one student included multiple comments that appeared to contain negatively valenced judgments about his environment could be a result of this bias. Strictly qualitative participatory research of this nature is always vulnerable to bias threats and leaves virtually no means for checking internal validity. In exchange, researchers are able to ask far more open-ended questions than would be possible with any preconceived quantitative survey.

VI. Conclusion

Ultimately, the use of photovoice methods to examine rural adolescent identity provided unique and meaningful insights that may have been difficult to uncover using other means. The continued study of adolescent rural identity using this and other methodologies will allow researchers to further uncover the subtleties associated with rural adolescent identity. This research, if heeded by policymakers, can provide novel insights that can be used to shape policies from drug prevention and other public health campaigns to reforms in curricula and education. For example, they provide information that can be used to adapt messages that are more effective for rural youth. Continued research on this subject will provide the tools for accurately targeted messages. A move away from “one size fits all” campaigns targeting adolescents (or, perhaps worse, campaigns based on research from only urban populations) will require a body of research, and participatory image elicitation could be one of multiple methods used to refine these findings into useful conclusions.

In addition, this study poses a number of interesting questions for further research. First, the absence of traditional religious ideas among respondents was inconsistent with the findings of other studies of rural identity. Could this be a consistently adolescent trait, or could other factors explain this discrepancy between rural adolescents and rural adults? The infrequent negative comments on space and isolation also were intriguing. Would another methodology with greater control over the propensity for socially desirable answers and a more focused approach find a greater number of negatively valenced conceptions of space, or would it be consistent with the almost exclusively positive comments listed here? Finally, though a strong communal spirit is thought to be important to rural identity, many participants’ comments

suggested they feel distant from their neighbors. While this does not rule out the possibility that they feel a strong sense of community connectedness (an idea which was supported in the interviews), the relationship here appears more nuanced than the existing research explains.

Ultimately, participatory image elicitation interviews provided a novel medium to engage participants. Its entirely open-ended format allows respondents to bring any content they desire to a loosely structured interview process, permitting them to entirely control the direction of the interviews. The methodology seems especially suited to cases like these in which a researcher wishes to gain deeper or alternate insights on a topic with an existing body of research. This study both reinforced existing research and suggested new relationships or directions for further exploration. Though its research style is atypical, participatory image elicitation shows promise as a way to gain unconventional insights on a research topic.

VII. References

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