

Rewriting the Rural Narrative: A Media Analysis and Community-based Comparison

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Introduction

Rural communities are vital to agriculture, energy, recreation, and the innerworkings of society (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019). Despite their importance, rural communities have been left out of federal policy, suffer from persistent poverty, and have limited access to things like healthcare and broadband internet (Cromartie, 2018). Rural communities are often described as bleak, lacking diversity, and stagnant (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019; Reed, 2020). These descriptions and the conversations had about rural communities very rarely include actual rural community residents (Aljore & Willingham, 2019). As rural revitalization efforts strive to make rural communities more sustainable, the narrative and story of rural communities must be understood. We must also understand how the negative external narrative about rural places impact the sustainability and leadership of these communities. There is a strong need to share stories of effective rural leadership to shift the narrative from one of dissolution to prosperity, hope, and opportunity. The purpose of this two-part project was to better understand the narrative of rural leadership being told about and by rural Oklahoma. This project was conducted through the Rural Renewal Initiative, a research initiative at Oklahoma State University, committed to conducting interdisciplinary, place-based research to catalyze the renewal of rural communities in Oklahoma and beyond. The guiding questions for this research were: 1) What is the current leadership narrative of Oklahoma's rural communities as told by media? and, 2) What are the leadership narratives of Oklahoma's rural communities?

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Community capitals framework (Emery & Flora, 2006) and adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) guided this study. The seven community capitals (human, social, cultural, financial, political, built, and natural; Emery & Flora, 2006) helped us understand how media portrayed the assets of rural Oklahoma. Adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) provided the lens for us to find meaning in the leadership narratives by understanding the adaptive nature of challenges and adaptive leadership behaviors prevalent in the community.

Methods

The analysis unit for part one of the study to empirically assess the media coverage of rural Oklahoma was media articles from the last five years (2017 – 2022) obtained through the Factiva database. The search criteria used were two mentions of both rural and Oklahoma, generating 1,443 articles. A sample of 304 articles were randomly selected. A content analysis protocol was created using recommendations from Krippendorff (2013) and Riff, et al. (2013). The protocol was reviewed by two content analysis experts external from the author team to ensure validity. Two coders were trained to use the 20-item codebook. Three items were factual, while the 17 remaining variables required interpretation. Interrater reliability was conducted on 20% of the sample and Cohen's Kappa was used to measure agreement on an item basis. An acceptable level for 20% of the sample is .70 (Riff et al., 2013). Factual items had a Cohen's kappa score of 1.0 and interpretive items scores ranged from .96 to .78. An inductive qualitative approach (Patton, 2015) guided part two of the study, in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 rural community members to understand their perspective of leadership in their rural community. We rooted the interview protocol in appreciative inquiry (Michael, 2005), as it "looks to create an energy, a renewed commitment to change and a sense of hope among the groups of people working to achieve [a positive] future" (p. 222). Data were coded using in-vivo and pattern

coding (Saldaña, 2016), during round one and two respectively, to establish themes. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness were followed through prolonged engagement with the data, multiple peer debriefing sessions, the use of members' voices, field data and notes, coding audit trails, and analytic memos.

Results/Findings

Of the 304 media articles, 46.4% ($n = 141$) were deemed to be irrelevant to rural Oklahoma and were not coded further. Therefore, 163 articles were considered relevant. Of those articles, 28.6% ($n = 87$) of them were positive, 25.8% ($n = 42$) were negative, and 20.9% ($n = 34$) were neutral. Articles were also coded for types of leadership. About six percent ($n = 10$) of articles did not mention leadership at all. Articles were also coded for mentions of community capitals. The two most frequently mentioned were human capital (76.7%; $n = 125$) and political capital (68.1%; $n = 111$). Two major themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme, *why leadership is needed*, included the sub-themes of *generational changes*, *contradictory views of involvement*, and *internalized narratives of their community*. One participant encompassed this theme through the statement: “. . . a lot of people still believe that rural people are ignorant and uneducated. I don't think people who aren't from rural communities generally have a great opinion of rural people.” The second theme, *what leadership looks like*, was comprised of the sub-themes *shared purpose*, *leader behaviors*, and *leader attributes*. Another citizen shared this sentiment: “Our greatest strength is our ability to serve one another. You see it all the time, people stepping in to help one another.”

Conclusions/Discussion/Implications

In the media narratives, human and political capital were mentioned more frequently compared to other community capitals. Although many of the articles pulled from the database were irrelevant to rural Oklahoma, articles were more likely to be positive than negative in tone. Many of the articles were not relevant to rural Oklahoma, suggesting the chosen database was not able to retrieve all accessible articles written about rural Oklahoma and potentially excluded local, small-town newspapers. Future research should begin with refining search terms for accuracy and precision (Stryker et al., 2006). The narratives of community members themselves revealed most community leadership needs can be identified as adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009), as most discussed were associated with community culture and values. Additionally, many leaders in the community exhibit adaptive leadership behaviors (Heifetz et al., 2009) by seeing the big picture of community challenges and bringing a variety of perspectives to the table. Shared leadership organically emerges and should be highlighted as an asset of the rural community. In comparing the media narrative portrayal of rural Oklahoma and the leadership narratives of a rural community itself, the internalized narratives of the community do not seem to be present in media. Also, although shared leadership was described most in the community, media narratives tended to focus on individual, political and organization-based leadership. While group leadership is mostly talked about within the community the media did not seem to focus on that form of leadership in rural Oklahoma. Social and community capitals appear to be most essential for effective leadership in rural Oklahoma. Further exploration into community storytelling could possibly help identify and address the source of the internalized community narratives. Extension leadership development efforts should help rural communities assess the cultural and social aspects of challenges and help develop avenues to share their positive leadership narratives.

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