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**THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION  
MEMBERSHIP ON RURAL COMMUNITY RESIDENTS'  
AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY ISSUES**

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Over the past several decades, communities in rural America have undergone dramatic changes, such as declining populations, aging populations, loss of businesses, churches, and schools, and sagging economies. In agriculturally dependent rural counties, many of these changes have been related to shifts in the structure of agriculture, and more currently, to the economic crisis facing the agricultural industry.

Awareness of and support for those farmers experiencing financial strain has been noted by both researchers and the public media. However, the degree to which residents of rural communities are aware of how farm financial strain affects their rural communities has not been adequately explored (however, see Leistriz and Ekstrom, 1986). Without awareness of how nationwide economic and social forces affect rural communities, residents may find it difficult to respond to such changes.

How have rural community residents become aware of the farm crisis' impact on their rural communities? More broadly, how does awareness of social issues develop at all? Because the research literature on social issues awareness is sparse (note Rich 1980), one purpose of our study was to determine the mechanisms by which residents develop awareness regarding community issues.

One mechanism of potential import in issues awareness development may be residents' involvement with others in the community through participation in voluntary associations. Community change agents have long attempted to use community voluntary associations (VAs) as vehicles to congregate and inform residents about community change programs. Thus, our study offers implications regarding the efficacy of this strategy to bring about community change.

Differences have been observed in the personal characteristics of individuals' holding membership in various types of mediating structures, particularly VAs. Membership in VAs has been related to personal characteristic variables such as occupation and education. For example, employed persons are more likely to participate in voluntary activities than are those who work as

homemakers or who are unemployed. Additionally, volunteerism rates differ across occupation lines. One survey found that 76 percent of persons in professional and business occupations serve in volunteer activities compared with 63 percent of farmers, 51 percent of clerical and sales workers, and 48 percent of unskilled workers ("1983 Gallop Survey on Volunteering," 1984).

Regarding education, individuals with post-high school education maintain more affiliations than do those with no post-high school education (McPherson and Lockwood, 1980). Further, persons with higher levels of education drop fewer VA affiliations and add more VA affiliations over time than do their counterparts with lower levels of education.

A third personal characteristic variable related to VA involvement is social status. Palisi and Jacobson (1977), studying the VA joining patterns of college students, found that status-dominant students joined instrumental VAs in greater frequency than did status-subordinate students. Instrumental VAs are those whose members delay personal gratification in hopes of maintaining or changing conditions of nonmembers. Examples include civic organizations, service clubs, and churches. On the other hand, status-subordinate students joined expressive VAs more often than did their status-dominant counterparts. Expressive VAs are those whose focus is gratification of its membership without intending to influence nonmembers. Examples include hobby and activity clubs.

The relationship between status dominance and VA participation could be postulated for at least two reasons. First, persons in higher status brackets have access to a greater fund of resources to manage. It would therefore be in their best interests to affiliate with others having similar concerns as a means of managing their resources. Second, persons in higher status brackets can benefit by affiliating with persons with similar concerns as a means of preserving their resources and social positions. They may choose to participate more readily in VAs because they have more at stake in the issues and decisions that face the community.

Gender serves as a fourth personal characteristic found to be associated with VA participation. Most surveys in the United States indicate that men have historically belonged to more VAs than have women (Scott, 1957; Babchuk and Booth, 1969). Women, on the other hand, have contributed a greater amount of time to volunteer activities than men. Although volunteerism has increased from 52 percent of the adult population in 1981 to 55 percent in 1983, most of this increase can be explained by a rise in the number of male volunteers. Between 1981 and 1983, participation by males in VAs increased from 47 to 53 percent of all adult males. The percent of females participating in VAs remained the same at 56 percent ("1983 Gallup Survey on Volunteering," 1984).

Women tend to be over-represented in expressive organization and under-represented in instrumental organizations. The difference in involvement by type of VA may be due to general cultural definitions of appropriate gender role behavior (Hausknecht, 1962).

Finally, married persons participate as members of VAs in greater frequency than single, widowed, separated, or divorced persons (Babchuk and Booth, 1969). However, McPherson and Lockwood (1980) found that, whereas married and single persons added very few new affiliations over time, divorced, widowed, and separated persons added a larger number of memberships over time. Marital involvement in VAs may be a function of family life cycles. VA participation increases as the family progresses through its various stages. As families approach its latter stages, such as the aging of parents and children leaving home, VA membership levels drop off (Atkinson, 1985; Smith and Reddy, 1972; Payne et al., 1972).

We next turn our attention to how involvement in VAs may be related to awareness of community issues. Berger and Neuhaus (1977) suggested that certain social structures mediate between individuals and macro social structures. Examples of mediated structures include the neighborhood, church, family, and voluntary associations (VAs). Each of these structures helps to shape individuals' awareness, definition, attitude, and choice of response toward those facets that impact their lives.

Involvement in larger numbers of mediating structures may be related to a heightened awareness of social issues. We would anticipate that as individuals participate in greater numbers of mediating structures, the number of interpersonal contacts they make will also increase. The increase in interpersonal contacts is expected because the various mediating structures may likely involve somewhat different networks of persons due to the range of concerns they represent. Through involvement in numerous mediating structures, participants will likely expand their access to larger numbers of people. Thus, they may be expected to have greater access to information on issues facing the community.

Based on these studies, we would expect that the number of VA memberships is directly related to income and educational levels. We would also anticipate that males and married persons shall hold a larger number of VA memberships. Additionally, we would hypothesize that higher levels of VA membership or any other form of social involvement would increase awareness of social issues.

To test this idea, a model was developed to explore the relationship between the personal characteristics of rural community residents, their social involvement, and their social awareness. More specifically, the relationships between the personal characteristic variables of educational level, gender, gross family income, marital status, and the social involvement variables of personal impact of farm financial strain, knowledge of a financially strained farm operator, and number of VA memberships were used to determine level of social awareness (see Figure 1).

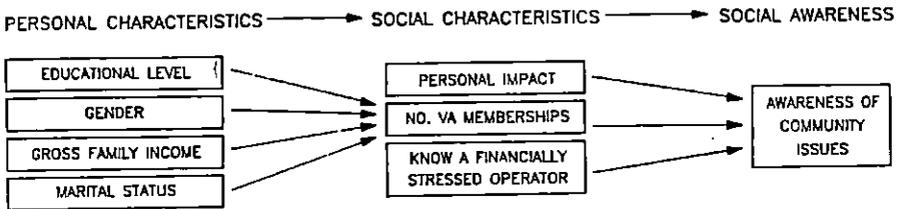


Figure 1. Relationship between status dominance, involvement in voluntary associations, and awareness of community issues.

### DATA AND AWARENESS

Telephone surveys were conducted with a random sample of community residents in six North Dakota communities during the fall of 1986. The communities ranged in size from 1,631 to 16,280. They were selected as representative of rural communities throughout the state based on the nature of their economies and their demographic characteristics and geographic settings.

Respondents were initially screened on three criteria: first, they were not currently operating a farm or ranch; second, they were less than 65 years old; and third, they were currently residing within the town or city limits. This screening was employed to insure that those contacted were community residents who had not yet retired. Of the 1,366 residents contacted, 788 met the screening criteria. Of these, 527 completed the survey yielding a response rate of 66.7 percent. The residents' characteristics were compared with the 1980 census of population. Given the screening criteria, the sample approximated the population's characteristics listed in the census (Leistritz, Ekstrom, and Vreugdenhil, 1987).

The survey included items pertaining to the residents' voluntary association memberships, personal and family characteristics, occupation, and financial condition. Scales were devised to determine the respondents' awareness of issues facing their communities as these issues related to the current economic condition of agriculture.

The primary dependent variable, rural community social awareness, was found by summing the residents' responses to items that measured the extent to which the current financial conditions in agriculture had affected their communities. These items included their communities, schools, law enforcement, medical services, mental health care, churches, public welfare, family counseling and other services, fire protection, and other municipal services.

The first set of independent variables, personal characteristics, included educational level, gender, gross family income, and marital status. The second set of independent variables, social involvement, included an item designed to measure the degree to which the residents believed the current farm crisis had affected them personally. One social involvement variable included the residents' personal knowledge of individual farm operators who may be forced out of farming because of financial problems in the next one or two years and the number of VA memberships they held. The number of VA memberships was found by adding the number of VAs in which residents reported holding membership.

The analysis consisted, first, of regressing the number of VAs on both the personal characteristic variables and the social involvement variables. This procedure was used to determine the degree to which these two types of variables would affect VA memberships. Second, the level of awareness of social issues was regressed on the two sets of independent variables.

Of special concern in determining the relative importance of the independent variables for explaining variance in the dependent variables was the Beta-weight. It is inappropriate to interpret *b*'s as indicators of a variable's relative importance because measurement in different units makes the values of *b* non-comparable. Beta-weights are the independent variable's coefficients as expressed in standardized form, that is, in *z*-scores.

Tests were used to assure that problems of collinearity were avoided. Additionally, tests were conducted to assure that the data conformed to the assumptions of multivariate regression analysis (i.e., linearity, heteroscedasticity, and normal distribution). Dummy variables were used in the regressing procedure for gender (male=0; female=1) and marital status (nonmarried=0; married=1).

#### FINDINGS

Of the 527 rural community residents surveyed, only 65 (12.3 percent) were not involved in any VA and 214 (40.6 percent) were members of only one VA. There were 154 (29.2 percent) residents with two VA memberships and 94 (17.8 percent) who held three or more VA memberships.

Nearly 80 percent of the residents (421 persons) held church membership. This high percentage of church membership is not surprising because 73.9 percent of the state's population reports church affiliation (Quinn, et. al., 1982). The percentage of church membership for the counties in which the six test communities were located was over 70 percent. Overall, if the residents were church members, chances were high that they were also members of another VA. On the other hand, if the residents were members in only nonchurch VAs, chances were not high for membership in some other nonchurch VA.

Following church membership, the type of VA with the highest membership was that of civic/service clubs. Nearly one-third (171 residents) of the sample reported holding membership in at least one such VA. Examples of these VAs included Lions, Kiwanis, and Elks.

The two VAs in which residents reported holding the fewest memberships were, first, professional or business organizations and, second, PTA or other school-related organizations. Nearly 23 percent (119 residents) were members of professional or business organizations, and only 18.7 percent were members of PTA or other school-related organizations.

To account for this variation in VA membership, the number of VAs in which the respondents held membership was regressed on the personal characteristic variables (education, gender, gross family income, and marital status) and the social relationship variables (personal impact and knowledge of a financially stressed farm operator) (see Table 1). Personal characteristic variables were found to be the most significant determinants of VA membership among rural community residents. Two personal characteristic variables were significantly related to the number of VA memberships. The respondents' education and their gross family incomes held Beta-weights of .260 and .221, respectively. The correlation coefficients for all dependent and independent variables are listed in Appendix 1.

One social involvement variable, knowledge of a financially stressed farm operator, was significantly related to the number of VA memberships, and had a Beta-weight of .150 ( $p = .05$ ). Using the six-variable model, 19 percent of the variance was explained.

TABLE 1. REGRESSION OF NUMBER OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS ON PERSONAL CHARACTERISTIC VARIABLES AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP VARIABLES; NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITIES STUDY, 1986

Variables	Number of Voluntary Association Memberships		
	b	Beta	t-ratios
<b>Personal Characteristics</b>			
Education	.247**	.260	5.817
Gender	-.061	-.030	-0.683
Gross Family Income	.000**	.221	4.620
Marital Status	.030	.013	0.279
<b>Social Involvement</b>			
Personal Impact	.110	.077	1.669
Know a Stressed Farm Operator	.161*	.150	3.247
Intercept	.297	-----	0.921
Adjusted R-squared = .187			
N = 433			

\* Significant at .001 level  
 \*\* Significant at .0001 level

Awareness of social issues ranged from a low score of 3 to a high score of 28, with a mean of 14.56 (s.d. = 2.92). Over 58 percent of the residents believed that the current farm crisis had affected their rural communities "a great deal" compared with only 4.7 percent who believed that their communities were "not at all" affected. The remaining 37.0 percent held that their communities had felt only "some" impact from the farm crisis.

Residents were aware that schools and public welfare were affected "a great deal" by the current farm crisis. Community services of which residents were least aware of having been affected by the farm crisis "a great deal" included police and fire protection (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. RURAL COMMUNITY RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF CURRENT FARM CRISIS IMPACT ON SELECTED COMMUNITY SERVICES; NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITY STUDY, 1986.

Community Service	Level of Impact by Current Farm Crisis					
	"a great deal"		"some"		"not at all"	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
School	90	17.1	244	46.5	191	36.4
Public Welfare	66	13.0	189	37.3	252	49.7
Churches	51	9.8	199	38.2	271	52.0
Family Counseling & Other Services	46	9.2	113	22.6	341	68.2
Mental Health Care	38	7.5	81	16.0	388	76.5
Medical Services	18	3.4	102	19.5	402	77.0
Other Municipal Services	6	1.1	35	6.7	483	92.2
Law Enforcement	5	1.0	54	10.3	467	88.8
Fire Protection	2	0.4	19	3.6	503	96.0

Awareness level of rural community issues was regressed on the same set of personal characteristic variables and social involvement variables with the addition of the number of VA memberships (see Table 3). As expected, each of the social involvement variables as related to level of the awareness of social issues. The Beta-weights for personal impact, knowing a financially stressed farm operator, and number of voluntary association memberships was .291, .187, and .113, respectively.

TABLE 3. REGRESSION OF AWARENESS OF RURAL COMMUNITY ISSUES ON PERSONAL CHARACTERISTIC VARIABLES AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP VARIABLES; NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITY STUDY, 1986.

Variables	Awareness		
	b	Beta	t-ratio
<b>Personal Characteristics</b>			
Education	.142	.052	1.112
Gender	.571*	.098	2.199
Gross Family Income	.000	-.005	0.109
Marital Status	.073	.011	0.240
<b>Social Involvement</b>			
Personal Impact	1.209***	.291	6.321
Know a Stressed Farm Operator	.578***	.187	3.990
Number of VA Memberships	.327**	.113	2.338
Intercept	11.529***	-----	12.377

Adjusted R-squared = .187  
N = 433

- \* Significant at .05 level
- \*\* Significant at .01 level
- \*\*\* Significant at .0001 level

Of the personal characteristic variables, only gender was significantly related to awareness level (Beta = .098;  $p = .05$ ). The seven-variable model was able to account for only 19 percent of the variance in awareness levels.

#### DISCUSSION

Based on these findings, the model developed to determine those mechanisms that foster awareness of social issues was supported. Personal characteristic variables weighted heavily in determining the total number of VA memberships. Education and gross family income, both measures of social status, were significantly related to the total number of VA memberships, while gender and marital status were not significantly related.

The fact that gender and marital status were not related to the total number of VAs may not be surprising in that a wide variety of VA memberships were cited. When particular VAs were considered, both variables were significantly related to membership. For example, married residents were more likely to be church members (88.2 percent) than were their nonmarried counterparts (69.2 percent) ( $X^2 = 31.44$ ;  $df = 3$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Had the family life cycle as suggested by Smith and Reddy (1972), been a factor affecting VA membership, we would have expected total VA membership to be related to marital status. Such, however, was not the case.

Male residents were more likely to be members of civic/service clubs than were female residents (43.0 percent and 23.4 percent, respectively) ( $X^2 = 22.97$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Male residents also held more professional business VA memberships than did female residents (28.0 percent and 18.1 percent, respectively) ( $X^2 = 8.04$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p = .02$ ). On the other hand, females reported PTA and related school memberships more often than did males (24.1 percent and 14.5 percent, respectively) ( $X^2 = 7.68$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p = .006$ ). Since the VA membership patterns of the rural community residents were divided along traditional gender lines, these findings support the cultural-definition hypothesis of Hausknect (1962). He suggested that cultural definitions may determine VA joining practices.

Only a small percentage of the variance in total number of VA memberships (18.7 percent) as explained by the variables included in the model. One of the difficulties common to studies of VAs is the concept of "membership." Different VAs have differing standards for membership. These standards range from dues requirements to a high level of commitment and participation. Some churches, for example, require certain religious rituals and/or a profession of faith as a basis for membership while others have no such requirements. Indeed, some churches do not even use the notion of "membership," but only that of "attendance" (Quinn, et al., 1982).

In the present study, the concept of membership was treated as a categorical variable. When all memberships were added together, it was treated as a continuous variable. Residents were asked if they held membership in only four types of VAs: civic/service clubs, PTA/other school-related organizations, churches, and professional/business organizations (see Figure 2). When VA memberships were added for each resident, a maximum of four VA memberships was possible regardless of how many memberships of each type of VAs the resident held. Additional research needs to consider the total number of memberships held by residents.

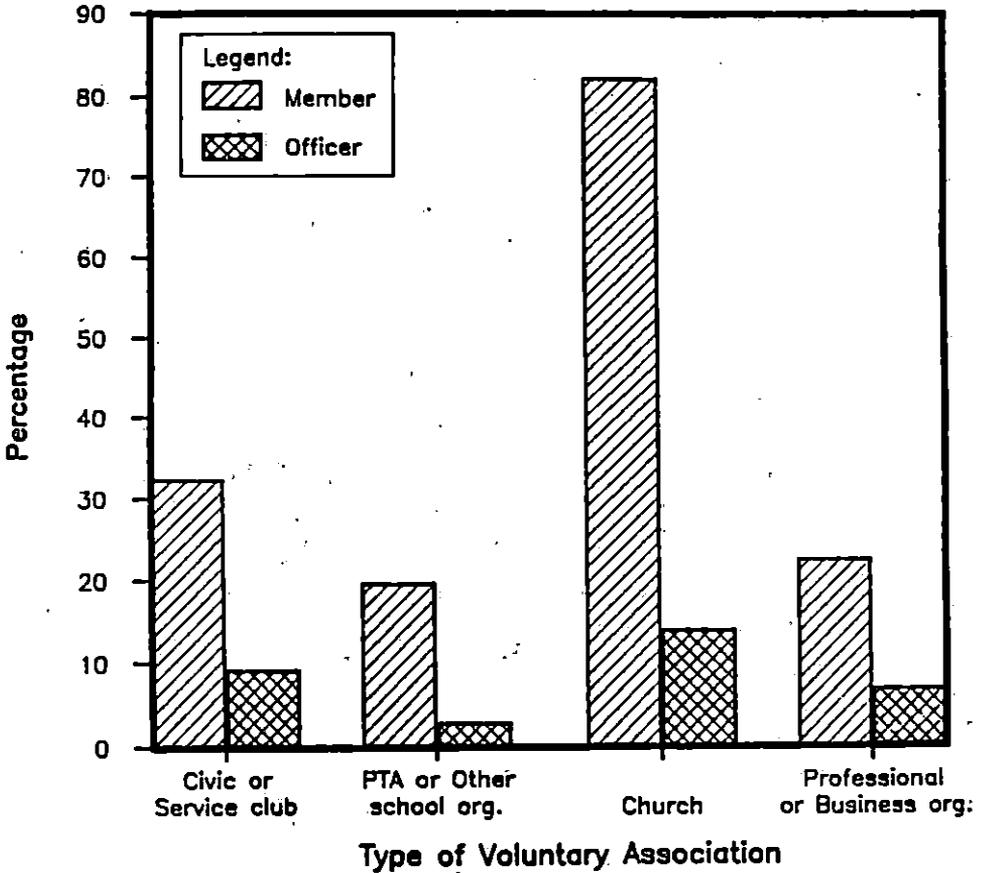


Figure 2. Voluntary Association Membership of Rural Community Residents.

As suggested by the model illustrated in Figure 1, social involvement variables played a more significant role in determining the rural community residents' awareness of social issues than did personal characteristic variables. Of greatest importance in determining awareness of social issues was the degree to which the farm crisis had an impact on the residents personally. This would imply that those residents who were involved in receipt or delivery of services or business in the community, that is, those most socially embedded, would be the ones most aware of the farm crisis' impact. Knowledge of a financially stressed farm operator and number of VA memberships also played relatively important roles in determining awareness of social issues.

Although social involvement variables were significantly related to awareness of social issues, only 18.7 percent of the variance in awareness was explained by the model. At least three reasons could be cited for this low percentage. First, as noted above, the measurement used to determine the number of VA memberships may have undercounted the actual number of memberships. Additionally, membership assumes participation. Without actual participation in a VA, its informing effect may be diminished. Further research should take into consideration the residents' levels of VA involvement or participation, whether measured as time, personal contacts, or activities.

A second reason for the low R-squared could be that additional variables may have been useful in determining awareness of social issues. For example, access to and use of media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, may play an important informing role for making residents aware of social issues. Access to and use of the media is related to personal characteristics, as indicated by the media uses and gratifications literature (for example, see Greenberg and Dominick 1969 and Rubin 1985). This literature suggests that the mass media would likely play a mediating role between personal characteristics and awareness.

A third explanation for the low R-squared could be that the residents were reporting accurately the impacts of the farm crisis on their communities. The community services in question were based in the local community but probably had financial assistance from funding sources outside the local community. For example, 76.5 percent of the residents reported that the farm crisis had "not at all" affected mental health care in their communities. Such services would likely receive support from the state government. Thus, despite financial stress in the particular rural locale, mental health agency services and funding may not be as severely affected as other sectors of the community. This being the case, variation in the awareness of social issues may not have been great enough to fully measure the actual range in residents' awareness levels.

The present study does indicate that social involvement has an important bearing on one's awareness of social issues. Such awareness is imperative if people are to respond to the forces changing the world in which they live. At least two implications may be drawn from this study. First, community change agents need to consider the use of relationship networks when attempting to disseminate information and advance social change. They need to make use of those organizations that mediate between macrosocial structures, which the change agent may represent, and the individuals in the community. One potentially useful mediating structure for the change agent to consider would be the VAs in place in the community.

A second implication stemming from this study involves the personal characteristics of the rural community residents likely to hold membership in VAs. Since, as has been noted above, there are differing rates of membership in VAs, not all persons shall be equally impacted by VA membership involvements. Persons with less education or with lower gross family incomes will be less likely to hold VA memberships. Thus, as change agents attempt to use VAs as a means of community change, persons from the lower socioeconomic strata may be left out. This is not to say that such persons are not involved in a social network or mediating structure, rather appropriate social structures must be sought through which to have an impact on them.

Rural America is changing dramatically, and rural community residents are becoming increasingly aware of how these changes are impacting them. It is primarily through their social involvements that this awareness can be fostered and responses made to the changes and challenges they face.

Appendix 1. CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR VARIABLES INCLUDED IN THE NORTH DAKOTA COMMUNITY STUDY, 1986.

	Aware of Soc Issues	VA Mbrsp	Gender *	Marital Status *	Educ Lvl	Gross Family Income	Personal Impact	Know Fin Optr
Aware of Soc. Issues	---	.189 .000 526	.009 .826 527	.064 .142 526	.093 .034 525	.049 .295 452	.370 .000 571	.324 .000 525
VA Mbrsps		---	-.080 .066	.167 .000	.326 .000	.295 .000	.131 .003	.223 .000
Gender*			---	-.208 .000 526	-.101 .021 525	-.166 .000 452	-.207 .540 510	-.046 .290 525
Marital Status*				---	.050 .251 525	.518 .000 452	.084 .058 510	.027 .544 524
Educat. Level					---	.197 .000 451	.001 .982 509	.118 .007 523
Gross Family Income						---	.055 .254 437	.037 .432 451
Personal Impact							---	.335 .000 509
Know a Financ. Stressed Operator								---

\* Indicates column or row of Spearman correlation coefficients.  
All others are Pearsonian correlation coefficient.

NOTE: Top number is correlation coefficient, middle number is p;  
bottom number is N.

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