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Work and Community Satisfactions of Psychologists in Rural and Nonrural Areas

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Measures of life, work, and community satisfactions were completed by 120 doctoral level psychologists employed by mental health facilities in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. The level of community satisfaction was significantly lower for participants in rural areas than for those in other locations. Level of satisfaction was negatively correlated with discrepancy between the size of community in which participants resided and the size of community in which they preferred to live. Satisfaction also was inversely related to the importance placed on having access to urban environments. However, the rural group's low level of satisfaction could not be attributed entirely to the influence of these preferences. Implications of the findings for efforts to staff rural facilities are discussed.

Adequate services cannot be provided by a facility unable to employ qualified staff. Rural mental health centers are frequently understaffed (Longest, Konan & Tweed, 1979). Thus there has been considerable speculation concerning the inability of rural facilities to attract and retain

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professional staff (e.g., Clayton, 1977; Gurian, 1971; Riggs & Kugel, 1976). It has been suggested that difficulties and stresses associated with working in rural contexts may influence trained professionals to seek nonrural locations (Hollingsworth & Hendrix, 1977; Jeffrey & Reeve, 1978). But previous research has not supported the hypothesis that mental health professionals employed in rural areas derive less satisfaction from their work than do those practicing in nonrural contexts (Perlman & Hartman, Note 1; Anagnostopulos, Sarata & Rivers, Note 2). It has been suggested that many professionals may be ill suited for life in small communities (e.g., Berry & Davis, 1978; Buxton, 1973; Wedel, 1969) and a lower level of satisfaction with community of residence has been reported for rural practioners (Perlman & Hartman, Note 1). It is also conceivable that lack of access to urban environments, as opposed to dissatisfaction with life in smaller communities *per se*, may contribute to a professional's choosing to seek employment in nonrural settings. The present authors are not aware of any previous attempts to examine the latter possibility.

The present study represents an attempt to examine three questions. Are mental health professionals residing and working in rural environments less satisfied than those located in nonrural settings? Is the presumed discontent of rural professionals related to both work-related factors and the quality of life in small communities? And, does a desire for access to urban environments influence the level of satisfaction experienced by mental health professionals?

Method

Participants

Participants were 120 doctoral level psychologists employed by mental health facilities in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. The employing facilities were categorized as rural, nonrural, or urban depending upon their proximity to a standard metropolitan statistical area (Office of Management and Budget, 1975). A standard metropolitan statistic area (SMSA) is defined as a county or several contiguous counties which (a) contain a city with a population of at least 50,000 or alternatively (b) contain a central city of 25,000 located within a densely populated area. For the present study facilities located more than 60 miles from the central city of a SMSA were classified as *rural*. Facilities located within a 60-mile radius of a central city but not within a SMSA were classified as *nonrural*; those within a SMSA were considered to be *urban*.

Initial contact was made with 98 facilities. These were all the facilities in the four state area listed by respective state administrative agencies as providing public mental health services. Of these, 16 agencies failed to respond or declined to participate; 24 employed no doctoral level

psychologists. Thus participants were drawn from 18 rural, 16 nonrural, and 24 urban facilities which represented 55%, 57%, and 65% of the facilities within each of the three categories. Every doctoral level psychologist employed by the participating agencies was contacted by letter. Thirty-four (79%) of those working in rural facilities participated. For the nonrural and urban psychologists the figures were 31 (86%) and 55 (73%) respectively. Only 20% of the sample were female; 5 in the rural group, 6 in the nonrural, and 13 in the urban group were women.

Variables and Measures

Three measures of expressed satisfaction were obtained using Kunin's (1955) schematic faces technique. This technique consists of a series of schematic faces which respondents use to indicate their level of satisfaction. The measure of *life satisfaction* required respondents to indicate how they felt about their general life situation. The *work satisfaction* item asked respondents to rate the current work situation including their "responsibilities, co-workers, opportunities, salary, etc." The *community satisfaction* item asked respondents to consider factors such as "social and leisure opportunities, the adequacy of public services, etc."

The demographic information which was obtained included the following: *age*, *length of current employment* in the same position, percentage of work time devoted to *service delivery* rather than administrative responsibilities, and *length of residency* in the current community. Participants also listed by name the community of current residence and the community in which they had lived longest prior to their 18th birthday.

Three indices pertaining to size of communities were utilized. Participants were asked to indicate the size of community in which they would prefer to live; the response alternatives referred to population (i.e., < 2,500; < 5,000; < 25,000; < 50,000; and > 50,000). Thus the index of *preferred community size* ranged from 1 to 5. Population estimates for the community of current residence and the community in which the respondent lived as a child were obtained by consulting census data for the relevant decades. These estimates were coded using the same population intervals used for preferred community size. Two discrepancy indices were then computed. The *preferred community discrepancy* index consisted of the absolute value of the difference between the sizes of the preferred community and the current community of residence. The *youth community discrepancy* index consisted of the unsigned difference between current community and that in which the respondent lived as a child.

Perceived importance of accessibility to urban environments was sampled using three items to which participants responded using a 9-point Lickert scale. Participants were asked to indicate the impact which such ac-

cessibility has upon the quality of their work experiences and work-related satisfactions; responses to this item constituted the *perceived impact of Urban Accessibility (UA) for work life* index. The *perceived impact of UA for community life* measure consisted of an item which required respondents to rate the impact of urban accessibility on non-work-related satisfactions. The third item, *perceived impact of UA for relocation decisions*, asked participants to indicate the extent to which future choices between employment opportunities would be "influenced by the degrees of accessibility to urban areas associated with each job offer."

Data Analysis and Results

Correlations Among Variables

Correlations among continuous variables were computed and are presented in Table 1. It can be seen from Table 1 that life satisfaction was substantially correlated with both work and community satisfaction; this suggests that global life satisfaction is a function of reactions to both the work situation and the community of residence. Work and community satisfactions were essentially uncorrelated indicating that respondents could and did differentiate between their work situations and their satisfaction with the communities in which they resided.

The correlation between life satisfaction and perceived impact of urban accessibility (UA) for community life was substantial, which suggests that respondents who reported high degrees of life satisfaction viewed access to urban environments as an important component of an optimally satisfying residential situation. Work satisfaction was not systematically related to any variable other than life satisfaction. As might be expected, community satisfaction was negatively correlated with the preferred community discrepancy index; respondents living in communities similar in size to that which they preferred, tended to be more satisfied. Community satisfaction was positively correlated with length of residency and with length of current employment; it was negatively correlated with perceived impact of UA for community life.

The three measures of perceived importance of access to urban environments were highly correlated. The perceived impact of UA for community life index was significantly correlated with several variables. In addition to the correlations already noted there were negative correlations with age, length of current employment, length of residency, and the preferred community discrepancy index; there were positive correlations with preferred size of community and the youth community discrepancy index. The perceived impact of UA for relocation decisions was negatively correlated with age, length of employment, and length of residency; it was positively correlated with preferred size of community.

Table 1

Correlations Among Measures

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.	Life satisfaction												
2.	Work satisfaction	.74											
3.	Community satisfaction	.45	−.03										
4.	Age	−.04	−.05	−.01									
5.	Length of current employment	−.03	−.03	.15	.48								
6.	Service delivery	−.10	.12	−.09	−.04	.03							
7.	Length of residency	−.12	−.07	.21	.32	.75	−.07						
8.	Preferred community size	.00	−.02	−.06	−.13	−.27	−.12	−.10					
9.	Preferred community discrepancy	−.08	−.11	−.23	.07	−.17	−.09	−.21	.03				
10.	Youth community discrepancy	.12	.12	−.02	.15	.01	.06	−.11	−.10	.10			
11.	Perceived import of UA for work life	−.01	−.05	−.03	−.10	−.12	.04	−.07	.12	.11	.12		
12.	Perceived import of UA for community life	.45	.09	−.24	−.18	−.22	.08	−.15	.17	−.16	.17	.55	
13.	Perceived import of UA to relocation decisions	−.07	−.10	−.14	−.25	−.30	.07	−.24	.07	.11	.07	.56	.64

With $N = 120$ r values of at least .15 are significant at the .05 level; if $r > .21$, $p < .01$.

As would be expected, lengths of employment and residency were highly and significantly correlated with age. Both were negatively correlated with the youth community discrepancy index. Length of employment was negatively correlated with size of preferred community. Age was postively correlated with the index of discrepancy between current and childhood communities.

Characteristics of the Three Groups

Each group's mean score on each measure is presented in Table 2 with the SDs for the entire sample. A 1 X 3 ANOVA was computed for each variable; the resulting *F* and *p* values are also presented in Table 2. It can be seen from Table 2 that life and work satisfactions did not differ significantly across the rural, nonrural, and urban groups. The rural group expressed significantly lower community satisfaction than did other participants. The other variables which yielded significant *F* ratios were age, length of current employment, preferred community size, and the preferred community discrepancy index. The discrepancy between the size of current and preferred communities was larger for the rural group than for each of the other groups.

Analysis of Satisfaction Scores

Life satisfaction scores were analyzed using the following procedure. A median split was done on the perceived impact of UA for relocation decisions index scores. Participants were designated as placing either low or high importance on accessibility to urban environments depending on whether the score fell below or above the median. A 2 (levels of impact placed on UA) X 3 (rural, nonrural, urban) ANOVA was then preferred. The following variables were entered as covariates: age, youth community discrepancy index, and preferred community discrepancy index. The analysis yielded no statistically significant *F* ratios. The importance placed on urban accessibility and the preferred community discrepancy index yielded *F* values which approached statistical significance, $p = .13$ and .11, respectively.

Work satisfaction scores were also analyzed using 2 X 3 ANOVA. A median split on perceived impact of UA for work life was the basis for the designating participants as placing low or high importance on urban accessibility. Entered as covariates were the following variables: age, length of current employment, service delivery, the youth community discrepancy index, and the preferred community discrepancy index. The analysis yielded no statistically significant *F* ratios. The index of discrepancy be-

Table 2

Differences Among Groups

	Group Means			SD for sample	*F*	*p*
	Rural	**Nonrural**	**Urban**			
Life satisfaction	6.33	6.70	6.87	1.40	1.50	0.23
Work satisfaction	6.67	6.57	6.57	1.89	0.03	0.97
Community satisfaction	5.52	6.93	6.98	1.96	7.17	0.00
Age	40.60	41.00	37.20	7.72	3.33	0.04
Length of employment	65.90	80.80	47.60	55.70	3.87	0.02
Service delivery	54.70	69.90	59.60	25.90	2.96	0.06
Length of residency	70.20	85.80	75.00	66.30	0.46	0.63
Preferred community size	4.09	3.87	4.52	0.82	6.66	0.00
Preferred community discrepancy	2.12	1.61	1.62	0.90	3.93	0.02
Youth community discrepancy	2.39	2.45	2.20	1.26	0.44	0.65
Perceived import of UA for work life	5.74	5.97	5.73	1.96	0.17	0.85
Perceived import of UA for community life	6.27	6.48	5.96	2.06	0.67	0.52
Perceived import of UA for relocation decisions	6.26	6.61	6.51	1.89	0.30	0.74
N=	34	31	55			

tween current and childhood communities yielded an *F* ratio which approached significance, $p = .11$.

Community satisfaction scores were analyzed using a similar 2 X 3 ANOVA. The two levels of perceived impact of urban accessibility were based upon a median split of the perceived impact of UA for community life index scores. Included as covariates were age, length of residency, the youth community and preferred community indices. The main effect for location (i.e., rural, nonrural, urban) yielded a highly significant *F* ratio of 4.88, *df* (2, 98) and $p = .013$. The main effect for importance placed on urban accessibility did not yield a statistically significant *F* ratio, $p = .17$; inspection of the uncorrected cell means presented in Table 3 indicates that participants who placed high importance on urban accessibility tended to report lower levels of community satisfaction. One covariate, the preferred community discrepancy index, yielded an *F* ratio which approached statistical significance, $p = .07$.

Table 3

Means Community Satisfaction Scores for High and Low Import of UA Subjects Within each Group

			Group		
			Rural	**Nonrural**	**Urban**
Perceived import of urban accessibility for community life	Low	M	5.94	7.29	7.39
		SD	1.77	1.44	1.24
		N	16	14	23
	High	M	5.06	6.63	6.67
		SD	2.24	1.99	2.14
		N	16	16	30

Discussion

The present data provide some support for the hypothesis that an appetite for the amenities available in urban environments contributes to the reluctance of professionals to locate and remain in rural areas. The present sample was asked to indicate the size of community in which they would prefer to live; the model response referred to communities with a population greater than 50,000. Participants who placed more importance on urban accessibility reported lower levels of community satisfaction. The discrepancy between preferred and current communities of residence was also inversely related to satisfaction. But the lower level of satisfaction reported by the rural group cannot be entirely attributed to these preferences. The analysis in which importance of accessibility and the community discrepancy index were entered as a main effect and covariate, respectively, yielded a significant main effect for location. Thus it seems likely that other factors contributed to the low level of community satisfaction among the present sample of rural professionals. Conversation with rural practioners provided some insight into the nature of potentially relevant factors. One, who was actively seeking to relocate in some other small community, was seeking a better school system for his children; another sought a small community in which the prevalent attitudes and values were more compatible with his own. Two others viewed relocation as a less urgent matter; they preferred to live nearer to a lake and a ski area, respectively. Concerns about schools and neighborhoods are presumably more likely to require relocation to another community if one resides in a small town. However, it is not immediately evident that the relation between community satisfaction and desired accessibility to skiing or water sports should be greater in rural areas. Thus empirical research concerning the nature and impact of factors other than a preference for urban areas would be useful.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the present results was the failure to demonstrate that level of satisfaction varies as a function of the interaction between location and the importance placed on urban accessibility. It seems logical to assume that among professionals for whom urban accessibility is important, those living in urban areas would be the most satisfied. The failure to obtain such a pattern may have been due to a discrepancy between the way in which participants defined *urban environments* and the way *urban* was operationalized in the present study. In light of the finding that the modally preferred residence was in a city of more than 50,000, it seems appropriate to presume that participants interpreted the phase *accessibility to urban environments* as meaning access to major urban centers. In the present study urban was operationalized as falling within a standard metropolitan area with a population of at least 50,000. Only a small percentage of participants acctually live in major cities (i.e., St. Louis, Kansas City, or Omaha). Thus the rural, nonrural, and urban groups are perhaps best viewed as representing successive levels of approximation to major urban centers. If the three groups are conceptualized in this manner the mean scores presented in Table 2 reflect the pattern which would be expected (i.e., two parallel curves of increasing satisfaction).

Several factors should be considered when drawing conclusions from the present study. Extrapolation to other regions of the United States may be problematic. The four-state area from which the sample was drawn is predominantly agribusiness oriented; the cultural diversity within and between communities is probably less than will be found in many other regions. Travel to cities and even travel between towns frequently involves substantial distances. Thus access to a variety of environments may be greater in other regions, and therefore the community of residence might be a less compelling consideration. Generalization to other groups of service providers should also be done with caution. The present sample consisted of doctoral level psychologists employed by mental health facilities offering outpatient services. The relevance of these findings for individuals employed in other contexts or trained in other disciplines needs to be empirically determined. Also, the present sample included relatively few females, and therefore the likelihood of identifying differences associated with gender was limited.

The present results seem to have implications for the task of adequately staffing rural facilities. The present data suggest that among previously trained psychologists there is a widespread preference for urban environments. Therefore, programs designed to train rural service providers must develop methods for identifying those applicants who are likely to enjoy life in rural areas. First, it would be potentially useful to have applicants explicitly examine how non-work related aspects of their lives would be influenced by living in a small community and by having little access to urban environments. Second, it would probably prove advan-

tageous to give priority to applicants who have resided in a rural area for a period of their adult lives—and who would, therefore, be better able to access their compatibility with nonurban lifestyles.

Increasing the proportion of professionals who willingly and successfully forego the amenities of urban environments for the pleasures of small town life will take time. As an immediate response to the preferences of currently available psychologists, rural facilities' managers might consider ways of increasing staff access to major urban centers. For example, reimbursing staff for travel to professional conferences and seminars would increase access to distant urban environments. Also the opportunities for regularly visiting urban environments could be increased without reducing client contact hours, by permitting staff to work 6-day weeks for 42 weeks each year.

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