

PREDICTORS OF NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY SATISFACTIONS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

An individual's neighborhood and community affect the quality of life for that person. The purpose of this study was to examine factors associated with neighborhood and community satisfaction of rural families. Data for multiple regression analyses were collected during 1985 through personal interviews with 506 randomly selected rural respondents living in six Midwestern states. Findings indicate that neighborhood satisfaction can be significantly predicted by satisfaction with neighbors, with location of home, and with conditions of nearby housing. Community satisfaction can be significantly predicted by satisfaction with neighbors, with nearness to shopping, with condition of streets, and with nearness to friends and relatives. This information can be used by professionals and decision makers involved in improving the environments within rural communities so that they promote the well-being of individuals and families living there.

Introduction

The residential environment in which individuals and families live can profoundly affect the quality of people's lives (Carp, 1986). The residential environment plays a part in one's roles, relationships, and sense of place in the world. The environment may affect well-being not only directly but also through its impact upon health, friendship, work, financial status, and possibly even marriage. Thus, a question arises: What factors significantly affect the overall satisfaction individuals feel with their neighborhoods and communities?

The purpose of this research study was to examine factors associated with neighborhood and community satisfaction of rural families. Previous research has most often been conducted in urban communities. This research seeks to add to the more limited body of knowledge about the predictors of satisfaction with neighborhoods and communities in rural areas.

Concepts

This research study focuses on three basic concepts: (1) neighborhoods, (2) community, and (3) satisfaction. The first two concepts, neighborhood and community, are conceived as domains consisting of various attributes. The third concept, satisfaction, is a personal evaluation of those attributes and domains.

Neighborhood is defined as the location of the dwelling unit and the nature of its immediate area (Morris and Winter, 1978). It is a locality group that is not as self-sufficient as a community in that it does not fulfill all the major community activities (Rogers, Burdge, Korsching, and Donnermeyer, 1988). Community is defined as a group of people sharing a sense of place and living within a defined geographical area (Rigby and Vreugdenhil, 1987). A community differs from a neighborhood in that a community is also the local politically defined unit in which an individual resides; the city or town for most people (Campbell, Converse and Rodgers, 1976). The term community is used in different ways (Hobbs, 1976). Often people think of it in terms of an economic concept, which focuses on the economic base of a locality and the extent of services and population that base is capable of sustaining. From this viewpoint, a community represents a good place to live if there are sufficient

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employment opportunities, as well as adequate education, health, government, consumer, cultural, religious, and recreational services. People also think of community in terms of being involved with other people. This refers to "a sense of community," which can be defined as a sense of mutual trust and involvement in cooperative ventures and activities. This sense of community is more concerned with the quality of social relationships.

The term satisfaction is equated with well-being and livability (Rigby and Vreugdenhil, 1987). Environmental satisfaction involves ecological, biological, and social components (LaGory, Ward, and Sherman, 1985). Satisfaction with a particular environment is dependent on the assessment of two fundamental attributes of the environment: the manner in which the attributes are perceived, and the standard or reference against which the attribute is judged (Rojek, Clemente, and Summers, 1975). A sense of satisfaction is a highly personal experience, heavily influenced by the individual's past experiences and current expectations. Level of satisfaction can be defined as the perceived discrepancy between aspiration and achievement (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976). Satisfaction with a domain of life, as expressed by an individual, is seen as dependent on his/her evaluations of various attributes of that domain.

Previous Findings

Neighborhood satisfaction

Previous studies of neighborhood satisfaction have focused primarily on urban neighborhoods. Findings indicate that individuals in neighborhoods having fewer dilapidated structures, lower densities, higher average property values, and greater proportions of the given individual's own race are likely to express higher satisfaction (Galster and Hesser, 1981). Less satisfied people are those who hear their neighbors often, indicate a high noise level in their neighborhood, have no privacy in their yard, have inadequate outdoor play space, and neither know nor interact with the neighbors (Lansing, Marans, and Zehner, 1970). Other factors related to neighborhood satisfaction include home value, liking the neighbors, and living in a well-maintained neighborhood (Lansing, Marans and Zehner, 1970). The most important predictor of satisfaction is the respondents' assessments of their neighbors, although their evaluation of the upkeep of neighboring houses is also important (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976). The highest levels of dissatisfaction with the residential environment occur among households reporting that their neighborhoods contain one or more of the following conditions: street crime, abandoned structures, run down housing, and poorly lighted streets (Dahmann, 1983).

Community satisfaction

Previous studies of community satisfaction have focused more often on rural communities. Little agreement exists as to the number of central dimensions that may make up community satisfaction (Sofrano and Fliekel, 1984). Previous findings indicate that residents find most satisfying those communities in which they think they have strong primary group relationships and where residents are heterogeneous (Goudy, 1977). Important factors related to general community satisfaction are the physical conditions in the environment and the convenience of having nearby public and private facilities and services (Ladewig and McCann, 1980). Satisfaction with services is a major determinant of community satisfaction (Rogers, 1982). Small town residents tend to be somewhat dissatisfied with medical services (Rojek, Clemente, and Summers, 1975). Both rapidly growing and declining rural communities complain of the lack of public transit (Kaye, 1982). Focusing on communities in general, Campbell, Converse and Rogers (1976) found that evaluation of public schools was most strongly related to community satisfaction.

Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) found the relationship between neighborhood and community satisfaction to be fairly strong. However, it appears that people tend to be somewhat more satisfied with their neighborhoods than they are with their communities.

Based upon the objectives of this study and findings from previous studies, the following two research hypotheses were developed and tested:

- (1) Selected attributes of satisfaction (see Figure 1 for listing) are predictors (at the $p < .05$ level) of overall satisfaction with neighborhood for rural households.

- (2) Selected attributes of satisfaction (see Figure 1 for listing) are predictors (at the $p < .05$ level) of overall satisfaction with community for rural households.

Figure 1. Hypothesized predictors of neighborhood and community satisfaction for rural households.

Satisfaction with:

Location of home
 Nearness to:
 --work
 --schools
 --parks and recreation
 --health services
 --police and fire protection
 --shopping
 --friends and relatives
 Condition of the streets
 Condition of nearby housing
 Neighbors
 Feelings of security from intruders

Methods

The data for this study came from the North Central Regional Research Project NC-178-Economic, Social, Psychological, and Health Consequences of the Housing Decisions of Rural Families. An interview schedule was developed by researchers in each of six states participating in the study: Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. The interview schedule was first pretested by administering it to easily accessible individuals in each state. It was then pretested on a small random sample in order to check for clarity, ease of administration, validity, and reliability.

The sample was designed to represent the conditions, attitudes, and beliefs of rural residents in the six previously cited states. Counties with large urban areas were eliminated from the sample. From the remaining counties, 12 were randomly selected from each state. Sample segments were randomly selected from the rural areas and smaller town (less than 20,000 population) within each of the 12 counties. The Iowa State Statistical Laboratory conducted a two-day session to train interviewers. These trained personnel then conducted the interview between May and November of 1985. Of the 589 eligible rural households living in six Midwestern states (Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin), 506 interviews were completed for a response rate of over 85 percent.

Data obtained from the personal interviews were analyzed using SPSSX programs. Multiple regression analysis was employed to discover the relative and cumulative explanatory power of satisfaction with selected aspects of neighborhood and community in predicting overall satisfaction with neighborhood, and to discover the relative and cumulative explanatory power of satisfaction with selected aspects of neighborhood and community in predicting overall satisfaction with community.

The first step in this analysis was to measure the association between all pairs of the independent and dependent variables. This was done through the use of the Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficient. To avoid the inclusion of highly correlated variables in the same equation, a precondition of this analysis was that independent variables with a correlation of 0.60 or higher would not be included in the model. Results of the correlation analysis showed that none of the independent variables were highly correlated.

Results

Description of the sample

Approximately one-fifth of the respondents were aged 30 through 39, and another one-fifth were aged 70 and over. Over one-half had completed nine through twelve years of ed-

ucation. Over one-half had one or two members in the household, while approximately two-fifths had three through five members in the household. Annual income was spread fairly evenly through people who earn under \$15,000, \$15,000 through \$29,999, and over \$30,000. Approximately four-fifths owned their homes while one-fifth rented (see Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of the samples by selected socio-economic characteristics.

Characteristics Categories	Number	Percent
Age of head of household		
Under 30	78	15.4
30 thru 39	108	21.3
40 thru 49	61	12.1
50 thru 59	71	14.0
60 thru 69	83	16.4
70 and over	<u>105</u>	<u>20.8</u>
	506	100.0
Level of education of respondent		
Less than 9 years	68	13.4
9 thru 12 years	290	57.3
Some college	96	19.0
College graduate/ advanced degree	<u>52</u>	<u>10.3</u>
	506	100.0
Number of persons in household		
1 thru 2	287	56.7
3 thru 5	207	41.0
6 thru 10	<u>12</u>	<u>2.4</u>
	506	100.1
Annual Income of household		
Under \$15,000	184	36.4
\$15,000 thru \$29,999	190	37.5
\$30,000 and over	<u>132</u>	<u>26.1</u>
	506	100.0
Tenure		
Own	411	81.2
Rent	<u>95</u>	<u>18.8</u>
	506	100.0

Satisfaction levels with selected measures

Respondents were asked to rate selected measures of satisfaction with their neighborhoods and communities (see Table 2). They rated these measures on a scale of one to seven, with 1=extremely dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=somewhat dissatisfied, 4=mixed, 5=somewhat satisfied, 6=satisfied, and 7=extremely satisfied. Rural respondents reported highest satisfaction levels with nearness to schools, followed by satisfaction with location of home, with the neighbors, with nearness to parks and recreation, and nearness to work. In the mid-range were satisfaction with feelings of security from intruders, nearness to police/fire protection, satisfaction with condition of nearby housing, with nearness to friends/relatives, and with nearness to health facilities. The lowest levels of satisfaction were with nearness to public transportation, satisfaction with the condition of the streets and satisfaction with nearness to shopping.

Satisfaction levels with neighborhood and with community

In addition to the selected measures of satisfaction with neighborhoods and communities, respondents were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with their neighborhood.

Table 2. Satisfaction with selected aspects of neighborhood and community for rural respondents.

Measures of Satisfaction	Number of Respondents	Levels of Satisfaction							Mean ¹	Deviation
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Satisfaction with:										
a. nearness to school	494	.2	.6	2.8	3.2	8.9	60.3	23.9	5.97	1.95
b. location of home	506	.6	2.6	3.8	3.8	8.3	54.0	27.1	5.84	1.22
c. neighbors	506	.6	.8	2.4	6.5	7.9	61.1	20.8	5.82	1.06
d. nearness to parks/recreation	504	.6	1.0	4.0	5.0	11.3	60.3	17.9	5.77	1.08
e. nearness to work	427 ²	1.6	2.6	3.5	7.3	9.8	48.0	27.2	5.75	1.31
f. feeling of security from intruders	506	.6	1.4	2.2	7.1	15.0	59.7	14.0	5.71	1.04
g. nearness to police/fire protection	506	.6	1.6	4.0	7.1	12.1	59.5	15.2	5.66	1.14
h. condition of nearby housing	506	.6	.6	4.7	10.5	12.1	61.1	10.5	5.57	1.07
i. nearness to friends/relatives	506	1.6	3.2	4.2	6.1	13.4	54.5	17.0	5.56	1.32
j. nearness to health services	506	1.4	2.6	5.7	7.5	15.2	53.2	14.4	5.50	1.26
k. nearness to shopping	506	2.0	4.9	8.1	8.5	17.2	51.0	8.3	5.17	1.42
l. condition of the streets	506	2.4	5.5	7.3	10.7	17.4	46.2	10.5	5.12	1.48
m. nearness to transportation	505	6.5	9.9	8.5	15.0	14.5	40.0	5.5	4.64	1.69

¹Scores were assigned to responses as follows: 1 = extremely dissatisfied; 2 = dissatisfied; 3 = somewhat dissatisfied; 4 = mixed; 5 = somewhat satisfied; 6 = satisfied; 7 = satisfied.

²Seventy-eight cases were not relevant as respondents did not work.

Table 3. Overall Satisfaction with neighborhood and community for rural respondents.

Measures of Satisfaction	Number of Respondents	Levels of Satisfaction							Mean ¹	Deviation
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Overall Satisfaction with:										
a. neighborhood	506	.	.6	1.8	4.6	12.5	58.6	222.0	5.91	1.92
b. community	506	.2	1.0	1.2	9.5	10.9	57.5	19.8	5.76	1.04

¹Scores were assigned to responses as follows: 1 = extremely dissatisfied; 2 = dissatisfied; 3 = somewhat dissatisfied; 4 = mixed; 5 = somewhat satisfied; 6 = satisfied; 7 = satisfied.

Next, they were asked their overall satisfaction with their community. Each of these items were also measured on a scale from one through seven (1=extremely dissatisfied, and, 7=extremely satisfied) (see Table 3). Slightly more than three-fourths (80.6 percent) of the respondents rated themselves as being satisfied or extremely satisfied with their neighborhood overall. Likewise, slightly more than three-fourths (77.3 percent) of the respondents rated themselves as being satisfied or extremely satisfied with their community overall.

Predictions of overall neighborhood satisfaction

The results of the multiple regression analysis of overall neighborhood satisfaction of rural respondents are presented in Table 4. The R² indicates that 62 percent of the amount of variance of the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variables. Significant variables (with p <.05) are satisfaction with the neighbors, satisfaction with location of home, and satisfaction with the condition of nearby housing. Variables identified as significant were included in a reduced regression model. The R² shows that approximately 61 percent of the variation in overall neighborhood satisfaction is explained by these variables.

Table 4. Regression analysis of overall neighborhood satisfaction of rural respondents.

Independent Variables	Model 1		Reduced Model	
	Beta	t	Beta	t
a. the neighbors	.58	.00*	.61	.00*
b. location of home	.19	.00*	.23	.00*
c. condition of nearby housing	.10	.01*	.12	.00*
d. nearness to shopping	.07	.09		
e. nearness to health services	.07	.09		
f. feeling of security from intruders	.04	.24		
g. nearness to parks/recreation	.03	.41		
h. nearness to friends/relatives	.02	.54		
i. condition of the streets	.02	.53		
j. nearness to work	.00	.99		
k. nearness to schools	.00	.95		
l. nearness to police/fire protection	-.05	.19		
m. nearness to public transportation	-.05	.15		
R ²	.62	.60		
Adj R ²	.61	.60		
F	50.82	213.34		
d.f.	13/409	3/419		
Signif F	.00	.00		

*Significant p <.05

Predictors of overall community satisfaction

Table 5 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis of overall community satisfaction of rural respondents. The R² of the model indicates that approximately 29 percent of the amount of variation of overall community satisfaction can be explained by the independent variables. Independent variables significant at the p <.05 level are satisfaction with the neighbors, satisfaction with nearness to shopping, satisfaction with condition of the streets, and satisfaction with nearness to friends and relatives. The significant variables were entered into a reduced regression model. The R² of the reduced model indicates that approximately 27 percent of the variation of overall community satisfaction is explained by the four independent variables.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify attributes associated with neighborhood and community satisfaction of rural families (see Figure 2). Satisfaction with neighbors emerges

Table 5. Regression analysis of overall community satisfaction of rural respondents.

Independent Variables	Model 1		Reduced Model	
	Beta	t	Beta	t
a. the neighbors	.31	.00*	.33	.00*
b. nearness to shopping	.17	.00*	.18	.00*
c. condition of streets	.16	.00*	.15	.00*
d. nearness to friends/relatives	.14	.00*	.15	.00*
e. location of home	.07	.15		
f. nearness to health services	.05	.43		
g. nearness to public transportation	.02	.64		
h. condition of nearby housing	.01	.75		
i. feeling of security from intruders	.01	.89		
j. nearness to police/fire protection	-.00	.93		
k. nearness to schools	-.04	.40		
l. nearness to parks/recreation	-.04	.44		
m. nearness to work	-.06	.21		
		.62		.60
R ²	.29	.28		
Adj R ²	.27	.28		
F	13.14	41.30		
d.f.	13/409	4/418		
Signif F	.00	.00		

*Significant p <.05

as a significant variable associated with both overall neighborhood satisfaction and community satisfaction. This finding is consistent with past research. LaGory, Ward, and Sherman (1985) found a social component in environmental satisfaction. Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) report the most important predictor of neighborhood satisfaction is the assessment of the neighbors. Given the importance of this variable, it merits additional study. Factors that influence satisfaction with the neighbors should be studied. These include such factors as whether rural residents prefer a high degree of interaction with their neighbors, or privacy from them. Another area of study could be whether the type of preferred neighbor changes as the family moves through different stages of the life cycle. The impact of organizations that tend to draw neighbors together, such as Neighborhood Watch, neighborhood associations, and block parties, could be investigated. Other questions that might be addressed include: How important is it that neighbors have similar income levels? similar values? similar tenure? similar racial background?

Satisfaction with location of home was found to be a significant predictor of neighborhood satisfaction. Further investigation is needed to discover locational characteristics that are important in rural communities and the extent to which these characteristics are geographic, social, and/or environmental.

Figure 2. Summary of findings of significant predictors of neighborhood and community satisfaction for rural households.

Neighborhood Satisfaction		Community Satisfaction	
Predictors	Beta	Predictors	Beta
The neighbors	.61	The neighbors	.33
Location of Home	.23	Nearness to shopping	.18
Condition of nearby housing	.12	Condition of streets	.15
		Nearness to friends/relatives	.15

The condition of nearby housing is significantly associated with overall neighborhood satisfaction. Morris and Winter (1978) report neighborhood satisfaction is related to living in a well-maintained neighborhood. Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) report an important predictor of neighborhood satisfaction is the evaluation of the upkeep of neighboring houses. This research is supportive of those findings. This finding lends support to programs that make possible the physical maintenance of homes within a neighborhood.

The multiple regression analysis of overall community satisfaction reveals four significant variables: satisfaction with the neighbors, satisfaction with nearness to shopping, satisfaction with condition of the streets, and satisfaction with nearness to friends and relatives.

Schulze (1974) believes that the concept of community satisfaction includes the sub-concept of satisfaction with the social environment of the community. Satisfaction with the neighbors and with nearness to friends and relatives contribute to satisfaction with the social environment, thus lending support to this theory.

Satisfaction with nearness to shopping is a predictor of community satisfaction. Rural communities are often criticized for their lack of shopping facilities. The mean score for satisfaction with nearness to shopping is lower than eleven other measures and higher than only two measures (see Table 2). This variable needs to be explored further. At what distance from shopping do people become dissatisfied? Are there certain shopping services that are especially desired by residents of a community? Answers to these questions could help persons involved with a revitalization of rural areas, as well as those persons considering starting businesses in rural areas.

Satisfaction with the condition of streets is significantly associated with overall community satisfaction for the rural household sample. Ladewig and McCann (1980) identify physical conditions in the environment as being important to overall community satisfaction. Survey results reported by Meeks (1980) show street conditions were rated undesirable by about 75 percent of those surveyed. To an extent, the findings of this study parallel the finding of Meeks. The percentage of respondents who are dissatisfied is not nearly as large, but it is one of the areas where there is the least satisfaction. The findings indicate that people living in communities with better maintained streets are more satisfied with their community than people living in communities with less well-maintained streets. This would suggest that a top priority for improvement in some communities would be street maintenance.

The review of literature indicates that crime and safety are significant predictors of satisfaction. This was not found to be the case for this rural population. Rural America has been traditionally portrayed as a sanctuary of security; and while Phillips, Donnermeyer, and Wurschmidt (1982) indicate that crime in rural communities is experiencing a marked increase, rural families in this Midwest population did not associate satisfaction with a feeling of security from intruders with overall neighborhood or community satisfaction.

This study did a better job of predicting overall neighborhood satisfaction than overall community satisfaction. This leads to the question of how community satisfaction might be better measured. Perhaps rather than looking at satisfaction with nearness to work, to schools, to health services, etc., it would be more important to look at satisfaction with the quality of these factors. Also, factors that measure employment opportunities and economic conditions might be included in the model.

The findings of the study raise more questions than they answer. However, the study provides guidance for the direction and design of future studies so that they might generate greater clarity and detail regarding, not only the attributes that are important, but the nature and description of those attributes. With a clearer understanding of the dimensions of these attributes, it is possible that decision makers and planners can make rural neighborhoods and communities more satisfying environments for their residents.

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