

Definitions and boundaries of community: the case of rural health focus group analysis in southwestern Manitoba

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Abstract: Rural areas - like urban areas - are sources of community. However, communities and community life in rural areas such as southwestern Manitoba face many unique challenges, including agricultural restructuring, rural depopulation, and the resultant loss of local services (e.g., health, education, business). This paper reports on two exercises undertaken in a series of focus groups held in communities throughout southwestern Manitoba in the winter and early spring of 2001. First, the paper highlights some of the descriptions and definitions of 'rural' and 'community' that were discussed by focus group participants. Second, the results of a mapping exercise, which had participants draw the boundary of their respective communities on topographic map copies, are described. These results indicate a variety of definitions and boundary structures. In particular, there is a recognition that a range of communities exists within which respondents interact. The paper concludes that regardless of definition or perceived boundary, rural residents in southwestern Manitoba appear resilient in the face of change, adjusting their expectations and desires in order to face the new realities of the twenty-first century.

Key words: rural, prairies, community, community-definition, mental maps

Introduction

Defining notions of 'rural' and 'community' has dominated both the conceptual and empirical dimensions of the social sciences for decades. In fact, the very relevance of 'rural' has been challenged in recent years (Hoggart 1990; Halfacree 1993). Goldschmidt (1946), in his classic study of the differences in community quality of life in Arvin and Dinuba, California based on the structure of agriculture, made the distinction between 'communities of interest' and the 'geographic community'. Hillery (1955) noted more than 90 definitions of community, before settling on a

distinction similar to Goldschmidt's description of 'social ties' and 'geographic area'. More recently, geographers have explored the notions of spatial and qualitative dimensions to rural and community (Leckie 1989; Kearns and Joseph 1995; Ramsey and Smit 2001, 2002 in press). They have also concluded that communities are essentially made up of people with some common identity or character, who are located in such a way that they can communicate. This communication can take a variety of forms, including face-to-face or telephone conversations, and increasingly, e-mail and chat lines via the Internet. The affordability and ease of access of the latter two have influenced perceptual constructions of community.

Traditionally, it was believed that most communities were locality-based, with social interactions limited primarily to the immediate local areas in which people lived. For example, Hillery's (1955) review showed an almost one-for-one congruence between social ties and geographic area. Others have suggested that this situation has changed, and that people increasingly operate within non-local communities, or what McClenahan (1929, 1946) has termed 'communalities', and Webber (1964a, 1964b) has called 'communities without propinquity'. Thus the individual, it is suggested, is no longer restricted to the boundaries of the 'traditional' community but can choose, or is impelled by changing social and economic conditions to choose, from a much wider range and area of opportunities. Both Webber and McClenahan, and their disciples, however, were working in large-urban contexts where the 'range' and 'intensity' of contacts changed at an earlier date, with consequent effects upon community (Wilson and Wilson 1945). Although spatial studies of rural communities are not legion, interpretation of the literature suggests that, in the past, most people viewed their communities as more-or-less contiguous spatial units that enclosed 'communities with propinquity' (Everitt 1980). The exceptions to this rule were, by definition, remarkable. The amount of investment in the local area has always, of course, varied from person to person and from group to group. An individual or group does tend to belong to a community or communities of 'limited liability' from which individuals may demand more than they invest — although they will demand and invest something (Janowitz 1952).

People have a variety of rural experiences - including those associated with 'community'. This paper sought to investigate the spatial ('geographical') extent of the communities that people lived and worked in within their activity spaces. It has been demonstrated elsewhere that activity spaces of people can give interesting insights into their spatial communities, and that these activity spaces can be mapped (Everitt 1976,

1980; Everitt and Cadwallader 1981). It has also, however, been clearly demonstrated that a person's mapping abilities are, at times, less than perfect, and that working with the end results of their efforts has to include some interpretive work on the part of the researcher (Everitt 1998). That is, there are distinctions between the 'official' and 'perceptual' communities - or, as argued by many others (e.g., Hillery 1955; Kearns and Joseph 1995), the 'geographic' (official) community and the 'community of interest' (perceptual). As noted by Ramsey and Smit (2002, in press), community is viewed by many as "an aggregation of people, usually in an area where the residents have some common ties and or interactions". Interactions within communities are based on important sets of functions (e.g. production and exchange) and structures (e.g., institutional and social) that are dynamic and interrelated.

For the focus group research reported on in this paper, it was felt to be particularly useful to try to capture people's mental images of their communities on maps, and to interpret these maps with a series of follow-up questions. To use the terminology pioneered by Rushton (1969), an attempt was made to gain insight into both 'behaviour in space' (the actual choices made) and 'spatial behaviour' (the rules that govern the evaluation and choice of location). These images and perceptions were sought to balance the Statistics Canada definitions of urban and rural within the study area of southwestern Manitoba. Urban is officially defined as geographic areas that "have attained a population concentration of at least 1,000, and a population density of at least 400 people per square kilometre" (Statistics Canada 1991, 278). All else is "considered rural" (Statistics Canada 1991, 278). One of the purposes of the focus group research was to examine how people's perceptions of urban and rural compared to the 'official' definitions.

Given the changes taking place in the 'official' rural Canada, particularly with respect to those regions facing depopulation, concerns about service delivery (e.g., health, education, elder care) have been raised (e.g., Chappell *et al.* 1996; Smithers and Joseph 2000). The purpose of a multi-year study at Brandon University was to identify determinants of the health of rural populations and communities in southwestern Manitoba (hereafter referred to as Westman). The notion of 'determinants' of health refers to the identification of appropriate indicators for assessing levels of health of rural populations and communities. The study is structured on a number of premises and stages:

1. to examine determinants of health frameworks as they relate to the rural population of Canada;

2. to develop a comprehensive framework for the determinants of health of rural populations;
3. to analyze secondary data in order to examine the determinants of health as they relate to the rural populations of Canada;
4. to conduct focus group sessions with residents of rural communities; and,
5. to compile and pilot an assessment workbook with selected rural communities.

This paper reports on the fourth section of that project, namely sessions of 15 focus groups that were held throughout Westman between January and April 2001. While the ultimate purpose of the focus groups was to ascertain measurable determinants of rural health, in order to provide context to such indicators, participants were first asked to describe their views and perceptions of what 'rural' and 'community' entailed. This involved two steps: 1) group discussion; and, 2) a 'mental mapping' exercise whereby participants were asked to draw the boundaries of their particular communities.

Methodology

Qualitative research methodologies and techniques are gaining favour in the social sciences (Berg 1998; Kitchin and Tate 2000). Focus group analysis, defined simply as "an interview style designed for small groups" (Berg 1998, 100), is one of many qualitative techniques which can be employed to obtain detailed descriptions of a range of phenomena in small group settings, particularly at the exploratory stage of research projects (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). The history of focus group analysis, originally referred to as 'focused interviews' dates back to the early 1940s. It was originally used to obtain views on military morale, and then in the post-World War II era it functioned as a marketing tool. However, social scientists began employing the methodology much later (Berg 1998). Given the acceptance of focus groups as an analytical technique and the uncertainty about what constitutes 'rural', 'community' and 'health', focus groups were deemed an appropriate first step to ascertaining determinants of the rural health of populations and communities.

In the literature, the suggested size range for the number of participants varies from fewer than 7 (Berg 1998), to between 6 and 10 (Morgan 1997) or 12 (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). While it is argued that too few

Table 1: Rural health focus groups, Manitoba, 2001.

Community Name	Date Held	Number of Participants	RM Population 1996	Settlement Population 1996
Strathclair	Jan. 23	4	1,030	377 ¹
Miniota	Jan. 29	6	1,025	217 ¹
Minnedosa	Feb. 5	15	665	2,440
Virden	Feb. 7	10	1,840	2,955
Russell	Feb. 15	16	550	1,605
Carberry	Feb. 27	12	1,900	1,490
Hutterite Colony	Feb. 28	16	na	100 ²
Rivers	March 1	13	895	1,120
Deloraine	March 5	11	620	1,040
Treherne	March 7	9	1,275	670
Glenella	March 12	15	555	130 ¹
Souris	March 14	8	710	1,615
Killarney	March 20	10	1,175	2,210
Melita	April 17	5	530	1,155
Glenboro	April 19	9	860	665

¹ 1991 data

² estimate for each colony

Source: Focus Groups, 2001

(under 6) makes sustained discussion difficult, and more than 10 or 12 makes discussion difficult to manage, Morgan makes the case that successful discussion can be facilitated with groups of 15 to 20 if they are managed in an orderly manner. As noted in Table 1, the size of the focus groups held in Westman in 2001 ranged from 4 to 16. Consistent with concerns expressed by others (Berg 1998; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990), the focus groups with 4, 5, and 6 participants were more difficult to sustain discussion within than those of between 8 and 15. Similarly, it was more difficult to ensure all voices were adequately heard in the larger groups of 15 and 16. Nevertheless, all meetings met the stated goal of having the participants define and describe what rural, community, and health meant to them. Each focus group was facilitated by at least two researchers, one of whom asked questions and guided discussion, while the other wrote comments on 'flip charts' that were displayed in the meeting rooms. A

research assistant was also present to record discussion. As Figure 1 illustrates, the focus groups were conducted in locations to provide coverage across the Westman region of Manitoba.

Participants were identified through a local public health nurse in each community. This proved to be a crucial element of the methodology as it led to a higher participation rate than has been found elsewhere. Attempts were made to include health professionals, clergy, farmers, seniors, youth, and business people; a gender balance was also sought. Each focus group was structured based on seven questions:

1. How would you, as a rural resident, describe community?
2. What do you consider to be your community?
3. What is unique about your rural community?
4. How would you, as a rural resident, describe rural?
5. How would you describe health?
6. How would you describe a healthy rural community?
7. How do you know when you live in a healthy rural community and how do we measure that?

After participants in each group had the opportunity to describe their own community and how it was unique, participants were handed a letter-sized photocopy taken from a 1:50,000 topographic map that included their region. They were then asked to draw the boundary (or boundaries) of their community. The only prompt given to them was that they did not have to use administrative boundaries to draw their boundary.

Descriptive Definitions of Rural and Community

As noted in Table 2, focus group discussion regarding what constitutes both rural and community was wide-ranging. In terms of community, the rural structure and agricultural nature of the study area are evidenced by the mention of ‘connection to land’ and ‘lower population density’. More germane to the spatial nature of community were such notions as “patterns of interaction”, ‘population diversity’, ‘trading area’, and ‘layered communities’. Nevertheless, throughout the focus group sessions, it was evident that the spatial community was much larger than the municipal entity (e.g., Strathclair proper). The community of interest is much more complex to describe as it transcends all aspects of social networks as defined by individuals. Much of the discussion was consistent with the sociological literature of community representing a sense of belonging,

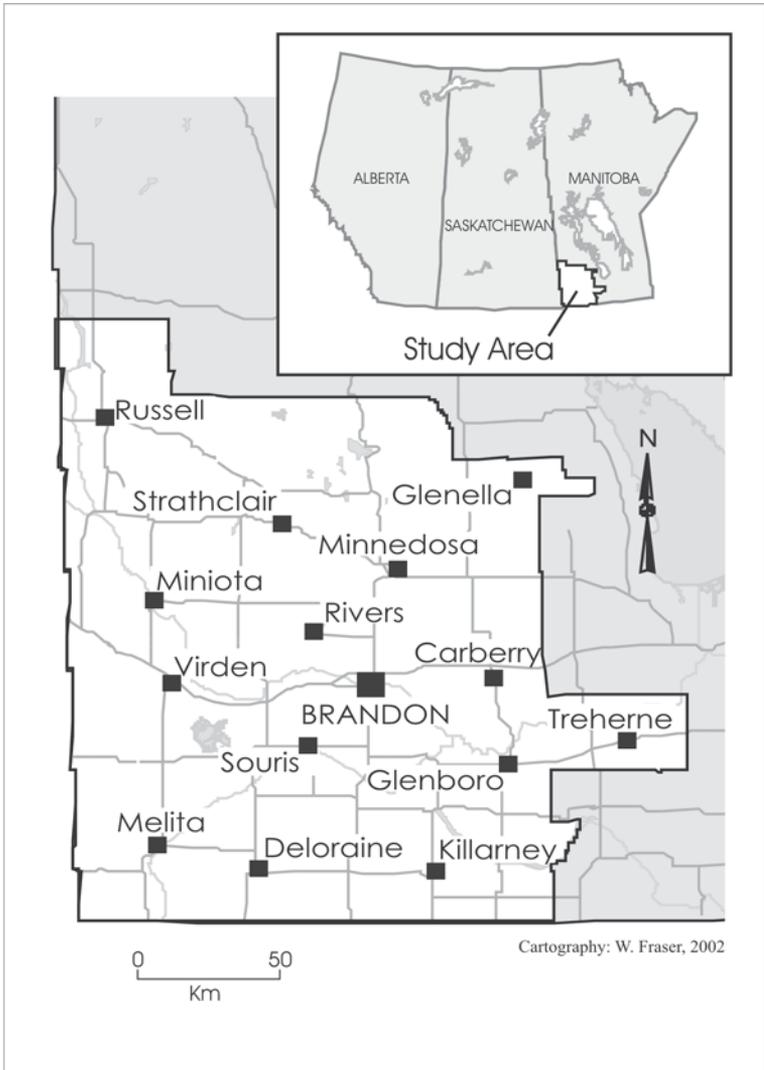


Figure 1: Focus group study regions in southwestern Manitoba.

Table 2: Focus group descriptions of rural and community.

Term	Geographic/Spatial	Interest
Rural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anything outside of the city • “rural is country to me, kinda small town” • “Brandon is like a rural city” • Farm life; agriculture • Less population density • Open space • Anything outside the perimeter • “people who are scattered are more rural” • Measured based on distance to obtain services • Low population over a large land mass 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “other people know your business before you do” • Being isolated • People are friendly • Higher quality of life • People volunteering their time freely • Slower pace of life • You don’t have to lock your doors
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some connection to land • Based on pattern of interactions • Less population diversity • Trading area • Area of people with similar interests • Layers of overlapping communities • “geographic closeness” • “it doesn’t have to be geographically small” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of belonging, common beliefs, and security • People experiencing things together • Place to raise a family • “working, living, and sharing together” • “it’s what you make it” (work, play, communications) • Based on relationships • “a place I feel commitment to” • “it’s the social fabric of the area” • “community is really, mostly people” • People living in close proximity • People know each other (and each other’s business) • Loyalty and roots • Lack of privacy • People coming together in crisis (and good times)

Source: Focus Groups, 2001

common beliefs, and based on relationships (e.g., Hillery 1955). Furthermore, notions of loyalty and roots, as well as closeness to those with similar values were mentioned. It is important to note that definitions of community included both positive (e.g., people knowing each other) and negative (e.g., people knowing each other’s business) aspects.

In addition, much of the discussion seemed to illustrate that boundaries of people’s communities (both ‘activity’ and ‘perceptual’ spaces) were expanding as rural populations and communities declined. That is, as population numbers decline, individuals, families, farmers, and business people need to travel farther to obtain services and to network socially and economically. This dynamic results in both a larger activity space and perceptual community. For example, in the Strathclair area, schools have joined together to field a common sports team. In other communities, local newspapers have become more regional. As small grain elevators close, and are replaced by inland terminals, farmers must travel farther to

sell their products. Additionally, participants who were either in school or who had children or grandchildren in school noted the importance of the local school and the school board in defining and redefining their community. A recent announcement by the provincial government concerning the amalgamation of school boards in the province, the first such change since the 1950s, could signal even more expanded boundaries of rural citizens' communities of interest (Dalla-Vicenza 2001).

In terms of rural (Table 2), similar discussion prevailed in that differences between space- and place-based descriptions of rural were revealed. In terms of the spatial community, participants noted generic (anywhere outside of cities and lower population density) and socio-economic (farming and rural) descriptions. Others provided comments linking rural to their context in southern Manitoba, specifically mentioning Winnipeg and Brandon. While there was no disagreement that Winnipeg was urban, there were divisions within and between group meetings regarding the classification of Brandon. Some classified Brandon as a 'rural city', others felt it was urban, and still others felt it had both urban and rural qualities, particularly as they related to Brandon's role as an agricultural service centre. Brandon also serves as a point for higher order health services (e.g., surgery).

A number of points, albeit fewer than those related to geographic community, were made regarding the social construct of rural. While some of these comments were similar to those for community (e.g., "other people know your business before you do"), others were unique, including feelings of isolation, a higher quality of life, a slower pace of life, and a feeling that one need not lock one's home or vehicle doors. With reference to the last point, others noted that such feelings are changing. Still others indicated that rural "was a state of mind" in that if one "feels rural", they are. Related to these types of descriptions were a number of statements that were difficult to classify. Because they are neither directly geographic/spatial or based on some type or level of interest, these comments were not included in Table 2. These comments included such statements as "rural is rural", "it's a state of mind", and it is "quiet and dark at night". Taken together, 159 participants in 15 focus groups illustrate the need to recognize broader definitions of rural and community than those that are utilized by official agencies such as Statistics Canada.

Spatial Descriptions of Rural Community

Although some of the results obtained from the mental mapping exercise can only be said to have offered self-evident responses, most, when coupled with follow-up questions, did give insights into how people now view 'rural community'. In general, the respondents indicated that to some extent they live in different 'psycho-communities', with the differences being a direct result of their different life spaces, particularly in terms of mobility, workplace, and leisure-time activities, and with these variations exhibiting 'site recalcitrance' (Orleans 1973, 126). Site recalcitrance is a result of physical and sociocultural factors acting together to restrict an individual's image of their surroundings, and thus their behaviour within it. This restriction is demonstrated both by the shape of the area designated and by the distances involved, where role variations result in different levels of environmental apprehension, despite the fact that the same basic opportunity sets are open to everybody. Site recalcitrance may be strongly related to the physical and socioeconomic patterns of the area, but distance is influential identifying those places that are frequented most often.

Of the 159 focus group participants, 138 provided a completed map. Five chose not to participate, and maps were not distributed to the Hutterite focus group (n=16), as individuals came from three different colonies to attend. The structure of the delineations of the focus group maps varied in size and shape. In order to classify these depictions, the maps were first categorized based on percentage cover. As indicated in Table 3, most respondents drew boundaries that included less than half of the map area, indicating that they were taking a considered approach to this question. The total number of map types listed in Table 3 is 132. The remaining six maps did not include spatial delineations, but rather written comments that their particular community was larger than the map area or represented an area not included on the sheet provided. Of particular note is the role of technology and communications in this regard. One individual, for example, commented that he was closer to people overseas through electronic communications than the area in which he resided.

The maps were then classified by shape. Six general shapes were identified: extended, amoeba, nodal, multi-nodal, linear, and wagon wheel (Figure 2). First, many of the respondents mapped what appear to be 'traditional' representations of community. For some small town dwellers this amounted to the area of the settlement in which they lived (nodal). For farm-dwellers this constituted a larger area that surrounded and enclosed the local central place (extended). These respondents designated

Table 3: Focus group participants' community boundary delineations.

Community	Percent Coverage of Total Map				Total ¹
	0-24	25-49	50-74	75+	
Strathclair	2	2	-	-	4
Miniota	6	-	-	-	6
Minnedosa	7	3	2	3	15
Virden	6	3	1	-	10
Russell	3	4	3	3	13
Carberry	4	7	-	-	11
Hutterites ²	na	na	na	na	na
Rivers	3	10	-	-	13
Deloraine	3	6	2	-	11
Treherne	3	3	-	3	9
Glenella ³	5	5	5	0	15
Souris	-	4	3	-	7
Killarney	2	5	3	-	10
Melita	-	1	-	4	5
Glenboro	3	6	-	-	9
Total	47	59	19	13	138

¹ 5 participants did not complete the mapping exercise

² Maps not distributed at these meetings

³ Maps were copied on 11"x17" stock

Source: Focus Groups, 2001

areas similar to those found for rural dwellers a quarter century ago (Everitt 1980), which were less propinquitous than those of the small town dwellers, but at the same time still exhibited evidence of site recalcitrance.

Second, some respondents mapped untraditional representations of community, with many being significantly larger than expected (extended). One person even mapped a large area as his/her "immediate community" with a footnote that referred to a huge "extended community" that included most of Westman. One extreme included people who mapped a series of unconnected community nodes (multi-nodal). Interestingly, these maps were similar to those of Hutterites who mapped their social spaces in the mid-1970s (Everitt 1980). The Hutterites' spaces were restricted by a philosophy that discouraged contact with the 'outside world'. The spaces of respondents in the current study appear to be limited more by individual

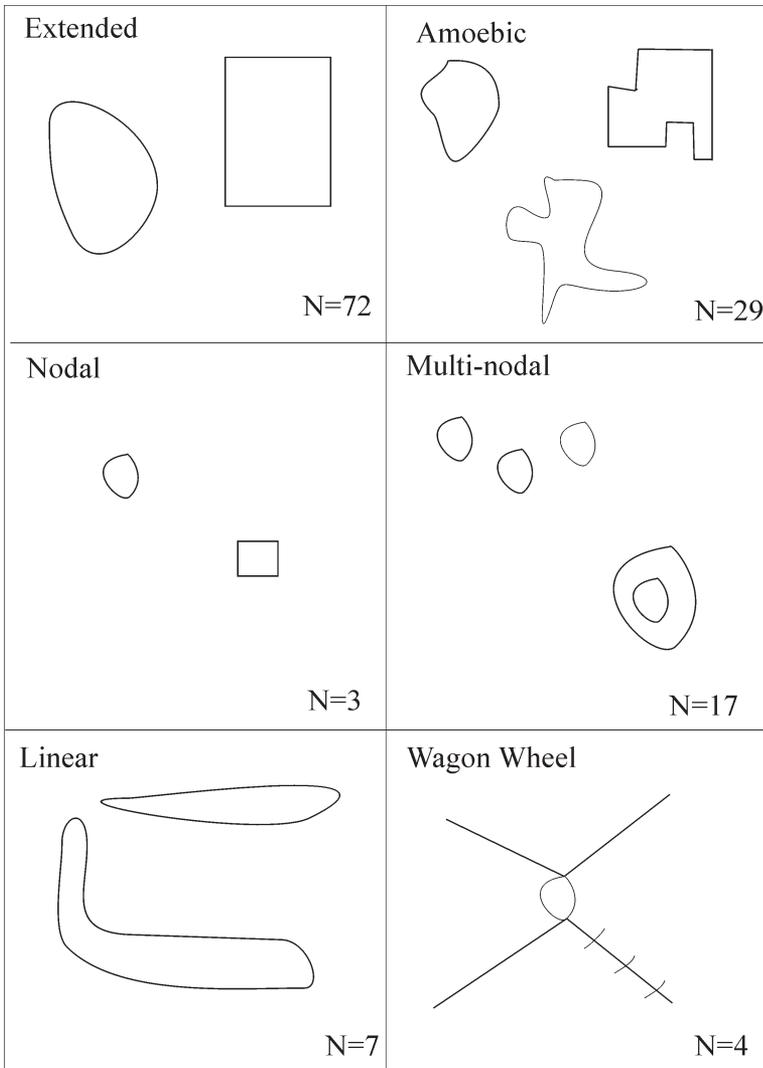


Figure 2: Composites of community boundaries by focus group participants.

choice and circumstance than by group ideology. There are suggestions, however, that different-sized areas may be found in different parts of Westman, perhaps reflecting population density and socioeconomic opportunities. As such, they reflect the changing range and intensity of social and economic interactions within rural communities in Westman over the past few decades.

Third, there were numerous examples of site recalcitrance. One of the typical examples includes participants who indicated ‘shapes’ that were clearly drawn to include nodes (e.g., villages and towns) that were joined together by wide pathways (linear and wagon wheel). These pathways were based upon roads and/or railways — although in some instances the rail line was no longer operational. In a number of instances, the pathways extended beyond the map area.

Fourth, the boundaries of many areas mapped included social, political, and physical boundaries. Thus, traditional social barriers between competing/conflicting communities can be determined, but municipal or provincial boundaries can also be isolated, as can the effects of rivers, lakes and other environmental features (amoeba, extended, wagon wheel). The right-angled depictions of some of the extended, nodal, and amoebic shapes were bounded along road and township lines (Figure 2). Similarly, the level of detail in the amoebic shaped delineations varied.

Conclusions

While the results of the focus group analysis are illustrative of changes that have taken place within Westman communities in recent years, they are, if anything, probably understating the extent of the change that has taken place. In part, this reflected the concentration on ‘local actions’ within the focus group sessions; in part, it reflects the fact that when individuals were supplied maps upon which it was hoped the respondents could draw their communities, in some cases the size of these areas was underestimated. Consequently these respondents simply indicated the whole of the area supplied (extended), while others indicated that their communities extended a significant distance off of these maps. As often is the case, the results have proven to be both intriguing summaries of what is there, as well as providing clear indications of how the methodology could be adjusted in order to obtain a more accurate picture of this ‘reality’. This is particularly true as rural depopulation continues, school boards amalgamate, grain elevators are replaced with in-land terminals, and rumours of rural health service restructuring abound. As Christaller noted more than 30 years

ago, as nodes disappear, areal districts expand (in Johnston 1994). Having a better understanding of the spatial and perceptual definitions of rural and community ensures that response to restructuring is both appropriate and relevant.

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