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Critical Consciousness & the Rural-Urban Divide

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by

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Critical Consciousness & Rural-Urban Divide

In United States culture today, perspectives on values, politics, and overall ways of life vary greatly between rural and urban locations. To account for this difference, researchers have expounded multiple sources including race, class, population density (e.g. less interaction with other people), geographic distance between cities and rural areas (e.g. Gimpel et al.'s (2020) hypothesis that novel ideas from urban centers are limited in their spread to rural areas due to physical distance), bipartisan media (Gimpel et al., 2020; Pew Research Center, 2012), and groupthink (i.e. social psychology theory in which individuals align with group consensus in order to maintain group homogeneity, while sacrificing individual reasoning in the process; Schmidt, 2023). Others note that when combined with groupthink, key rural value differences can be explained as rural consciousness (i.e. a form of group consciousness encompassing a set of place-based ideas which seek to explain shared standing in relation to societal power hierarchies; Walsh, 2012). Overall, however, the entirety of the story is unclear.

Despite the multitude of literature that exists on the U.S. rural-urban divide, many parrot well-known stereotypes (e.g.,. rural people are uneducated, racist, white *only*, sexist/otherwise bigoted; Chang et al., 2023), in turn reinforcing this same discord (Gimpel et al., 2020; Walsh, 2012; Nelson et al., 2021). Without venturing beyond these preconceived ideas, collective notion of this topic remains two-dimensional while the possibility of constructive dialogue surrounding key value differences lies dormant.

Freire (1970) defined conscientização (i.e. "conscientization" or critical consciousness (CC)) as "the means of which the people, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical Subjects" (p. 154). This praxis is a form of critical pedagogy aimed at critiquing and challenging power structures and involves both critical reflection and

critical action. The pedagogy of CC offers us potential understandings of current (and historical) divisions, however, information around notions of CC across rural and urban landscapes in the United States (U.S.) today is extremely limited.

To assess potential differences in conceptions of Critical Consciousness (CC) between rural and urban inhabitants, this study surveyed students in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at Portland State University (PSU) across multiple academic program delivery methods. Levels of CC were measured using the short critical consciousness scale (CCS-S; Rapa et. al, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study examines the rural-urban divide from a critical perspective, specifically using the framework of CC as described by Paulo Freire (1970). Freire (1970) studied how marginalized folks arrive at critical awareness and transform their situations, *without* in turn becoming oppressors themselves. He explained that forms of power (through the play of oppression/privilege) is detrimental to both the oppressed and the oppressor. The thread that keeps each group locked in either role (or its opposite, as seen throughout history) is known as "oppressor consciousness," which exists within both parties.

Employing dialogical action, Freire worked with various communities facing oppression (especially low socioeconomic status (SES) & education level folks in Brazil) to understand how oppressor consciousness functions both within oppressed groups (e.g. in terms of racialization, learned internalized racism) and through populations of privilege (e.g. in terms of racialization, learned externalized racism/racist actions) in order to maintain the status quo. Freire outlined "conscientização" and the various steps it entails (i.e. critical thinking, dialogue, problem solving) as a path toward mutual liberation.

Positionality

This researchers' paradigm is centered in Critical Theory, with a basis in CC (Freire, 1970) and critiques of power (Foucault, 1980), and expanded upon with Intersectional Theory (IT; Crenshaw, 2013), Critical Race Theory (CRT; Ortiz & Jani, 2010), and Disability Justice (DJ; Berne et al., 2018). With this study, they are located in a position of privilege as a member of the academic community, while currently studying at a public U.S. institution (itself coming with its own history and context) in an urban center.

Personally, this researcher identifies as white, low-income, disabled, U.S. citizen, non-religious, gender-non-conforming, trans, and queer; each of these identities correspond to their own unique and complex experiences, forming the context which determines how they both experience and are perceived in our world. Furthermore, while they have lived in both rural and urban locations, they have spent the majority of their life in urban centers.

Literature Review

Background

While the majority of the U.S. population live in suburban areas, most U.S. counties are considered rural (Mitchell, 2020). Research demonstrates a variety of distinctions between the two location types across a multitude of topics. These differences revolve around values (from political party to views on government, and immigration to abortion; Parker et al., 2018), health and access issues (rural areas face lack of infrastructure, including adequate healthcare, education, internet, and finance, Parker et al., 2018; Love & Powe, 2020), as well as demographics (U.S. urban areas are majority nonwhite while rural and suburban areas are white majority; on the other hand, rural areas have higher amounts of people with disabilities and

elderly compared to urban areas, Parker et al., 2018). These key cultural, political, and socio-economic distinctions are often referred to as the rural-urban divide.

Rural-Urban Divide

Hypotheses on the motives driving the rural-urban divide tend to vary. Walsh's (2012) study on conceptions of inequality and rural consciousness in rural Wisconsin unpacked various ideas behind key value differences. Walsh explained that rural consciousness solidified rural-located folks with groupthink centered on shared low socio-economic status and systematic disenfranchisement of their community; this was mainly blamed "as the fault of (urban) political elites" (p. 518). In other words, Walsh's rural participants reported viewing urban inhabitants as powerful outsiders (e.g. urban elites) who interfere in their communities and deny them respect. This divide in perspectives along geographical lines has become an easy target for biased media, politicians, and other powerful organizations and individuals to take advantage of.

Politics

Some researchers note these leans are so pronounced and reliable that they can be used to generally predict elections (Gimpel et al., 2020), with voting data demonstrating rural voters consistently lean Republican while urbanites lean Democrat (Gimpel et al, 2020; Kelly & Lobao, 2019). Love & Loh (2020) describe how the election of Donald Trump as President is often blamed on rural areas. However, Parker et al. (2018) state, "[political] differences shrink when partisanship is taken into account" (para. 20). Looking closer, it is evident that rural is often conflated with republican as "white non-Hispanic voters continue to identify with the Republican Party or lean Republican by a sizable margin (53% to 42%)" (Doherty et al., 2020, para. 8). In fact, "the majority of white voters have voted for Republicans in presidential elections going back to the 1960s;" Demby, 2020, para. 4).

Media

Research like the Kohut et al. (2012) study on media credibility have echoed the country's political division, showing republicans favoring right-leaning outlets (e.g. Fox News and most local TV stations) and democrats favoring left-leaning ones (e.g. NBC, New York Times, CNN, etc.). Across this divide, however, credibility ratings of most news media organizations continue to decrease yearly, regardless of political affiliation (p. 7), while more recent studies have shown media division along party lines continues to increase (Gimpel et al., 2020; Kelly & Lobao, 2019).

In an interview with Cole (2023), Cramer describes how such stereotypes allow politicians to exploit the rural-urban divide and the wide array of topics it covers, as it "maps onto many divides among significant social groups in society" (p. 431). Foucault (1980) explains how the idea of "truth" in a society is created by political and economic forces through the media (pp. 131-132). Interestingly, Parker et al. (2018) found that both urban and rural respondents felt misunderstood and looked down upon by folks from different community location types.

Race

Stereotypes of both location types are employed across bipartisan media networks, with rural-located people typically depicted as poor, white, and uneducated (Junod et al., 2020). Many research articles reduce the rural-urban divide to stereotypes as well (e.g. rural areas as racist, Nelsen & Petsko, 2021; rural areas as anti-intellectual, Trujillo, 2022). However, researchers illustrate the classist and racialized framings often used in such stereotypes, and warn against the impact this has - especially on rural communities of color who face multiple intersecting layers of oppression (Junod et al., 2020; Love & Powe, 2020).

Recent research depicts growing diversity in rural U.S. areas (Junod et al., 2020, note 22% of U.S. rural residents are people of color). Love & Loh note, "rural America is not all white, and spreading this falsity caters to white supremacy" (2020, para. 4). Walsh (2012) warns against over-simplifying the rural-urban divide, as in the case of racism, because it can lead us to overlook the various issues that occur in urban centers (e.g. covert vs. overt racism).

Measurements of CC

In the past decade, researchers have made strides toward accurately measuring CC via the ongoing development of new instruments; these include: the Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI; Thomas et al., 2014), the Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness (MACC; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016), and the Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS; Diemer et al., 2017). All measures of CC were tested with populations aligned with Freire's work (i.e. marginalized communities coming to critical awareness;1970).

Further editing of these measures eventually led to the "short critical consciousness scale" (CCS-S; Rapa et al., 2020), which assesses CC scores in only 14 questions, thus providing a tool that is significantly shorter in length and easier to use in practice than the previous measurements. Additionally, the CCS-S incorporates three aspects of CC, while previous scales measure only portions of it (i.e. researchers paired Freire's (1970) original ideas of critical reflection and action forming praxis with the introduction of critical motivation as an intermediary step which acknowledges "the interest and agency one has to redress such inequities," Rapa et al., 2020, p. 1).

The CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020) was validated using two samples of youth facing marginalization (i.e. low SES, predominantly identified as African American or Black). The measurement demonstrated "adequate" to "good" internal consistency of $0.77 \leq \alpha \leq 0.87$ (p. 5).

Additionally, measurement invariance across ethnicity/race, gender, and grade level was determined "good" (Rapa et al., 2020, p. 5-6).

Additional research with CC and its measurements have nearly exclusively focused on oppressed populations (Diemer et al., 2015; Diemer, 2020). However, a current debate among researchers centers on whether it is ethical to use Freire's (1970) concepts of CC (and recent corresponding measures) with populations experiencing higher degrees privilege (Diemer, 2020). Preliminary research involving conceptions of CC and populations experiencing varying degrees of privilege and marginalization suggest it is a topic worthy of research (e.g. Diemer, 2020; Hershberg & Johnson, 2019; Patterson et al., 2021). Patterson et al. (2021) recently studied conceptions of CC with predominantly white, rural adolescents using the measure of adolescent critical consciousness (MACC; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016) with "good" to "excellent" internal consistency of $0.80 \leq \alpha \leq 0.91$ (p. 351); the MACC was initially tested using a sample of Latine high school youth and found a "good" fit for the study data (p. 543).

Although Rapa et al. (2020) note the CCS-S requires further validation (including when evaluating for differences across populations), they also advise further research with the measurement using populations at various intersections of identity. Additionally, they suggest future research to consider participants' environmental contexts, as these may have unforeseen impacts on response data.

Diemer (2020) recommend that while CC work should maintain its original focus of supporting marginalized communities (and that CC work with populations of privilege should look more like assessing how participants understand the functions of oppression rather than personal degrees of marginalization), they specify that future research with communities

experiencing various levels of privilege is warranted as it could help illuminate deeper understandings of the different ways CC develops across populations.

Research Gap

There is currently a gap in literature which examines the rural-urban divide from a CC perspective. While few studies have researched levels of critical reflection among populations of privilege (or variations thereof; e.g. Hershberg & Johnson, 2019), even fewer have attempted to use measurements of CC with such populations (e.g. Patterson et al., 2021). Reasons for this gap include the relatively recent development and validation of CC measures (Diemer et al., 2015), ethical debates around which populations CC measures should be used with (Diemer, 2020), and misconceptions around the original aspects of CC identified by Paolo Freire (Macedo, 2018).

The use of CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020) with populations that primarily differ by geography (across varying levels of marginalization & privilege) to understand potential differences in values and conceptions of CC brings a new lens with which to understand the familiar topic of the rural-urban divide, and potentially help us pinpoint where to pursue future research and strategize solutions.

Context of Study

Looking at the rural-urban divide from a critical perspective prompts inquiry into the national and regional histories that have shaped the current context. Following the European colonization of Indigenous Peoples and creation of the settler colonial nation-state, most of the US was rural until the industrial revolution; this period provided opportunity in urban centers, thereby attracting larger population numbers (Library of Congress, n.d.). Following the end of the civil war, social transformation prompted mass geo-demographic changes, including: the second great migration of Black Americans in the South (to both rural and urban centers across

the US) and white flight from US urban centers to rural areas (Warde, 2018). While this was aided by certain federal programs and incentives, others, such as the "unworthy poor," also left urban locations, hoping for better living conditions outside of US cities (p. 44).

Turning to Oregon's state history, one can begin to see divides trace back to a too often ignored history, not dissimilar from the rest of the country. This includes: an extensive history of white supremacist colonial violence against Indigenous people (e.g. the Oregon Trail, the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850, Christian conversion schools, termination of tribal status & forced relocation from historical land; Robbins, 2002), anti-Black violence (e.g. anti-Black exclusion laws & the only state which included this in its constitution, lynching, and a large Ku Klux Klan presence; Allen, 2006; Imarisha, 2020; Oregon Remembrance Project, 2023), the exploitation of Latine immigrant farm workers (e.g. Bracero Program, Garcia, 2023). Imarisha notes, "other communities of color were also controlled, not with exclusion laws, but the populations were kept purposefully small because the idea behind it was about creating explicitly a white homeland" (Novak, 2016).

Today, only 2 percent of the state's population identifies as Black, compared to the 13% national average. Portland (the state's urban hub) is known as the "whitest big city in the United States" (Camhi, 2020, para 9), while Imarisha notes that Portland the current uber-liberal hub was once known as "the most segregated city north of the Mason-Dixon line" (Imarisha interviewed by Novak, 2016). The city's past includes segregation through racial zoning ordinances and the destruction of Black Portland (among other white supremacist tactics), while more covert discrimination occurs through ongoing gentrification, discriminatory policies, color-blindness, and rumors of ongoing sundown towns/areas, etc. Imarisha explains this is in

part due to the history of the state not being included in state curriculum (Novak, 2016); Semuels (2016), notes that the city "did not have a conversation about its racist past. It still tends not to."

Portland State University (PSU) is located in the previous Vanport neighborhood, having survived the 1948 flood (the same which destroyed the Black neighborhood nearby; Wanderon, 2016). Today, it is known as one of the most liberal colleges in the U.S., with its School of Social Work being one of its top graduate departments (Facts: PSU by the Numbers, 2022).

Methodology

Research Design

To describe potential differences in conceptions of CC between rural and urban-located MSW students, this study employed a descriptive mixed-methods research design using non-probability, convenience sampling, and a cross-sectional time horizon. Primary data were collected for this study (using a self-administered anonymous online survey; Qualtrics, 2023) due to gaps in prior research regarding measurements of CC and the target population. Responses were entirely voluntary, anonymous, and included an electronically signed informed participation consent form; study received approval by PSU's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection Tools

The survey incorporated both qualitative (2 open-ended questions) and quantitative (23 close-ended questions and the CCS-S, Rapa et al., 2020) responses. Others have used similar approaches (e.g., the mixed method approach of Rapa et al., 2020, and the qualitative-focused approach of Walsh, 2012). The 14-question CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020) provided a feasible and efficient tool to measure the participants' levels of CC, while the qualitative responses (see Appendix B) offered participants the opportunity to further express their views on potential connections between current location, social identity group, and personal ideology.

Close-ended questions included basic demographic questions regarding SES and ZIP (Zone Improvement Plan) code. Income levels were determined using those outlined by Pew Research Center (Bennett et al., 2020) and the U.S. government ("Poverty Guidelines," 2023). Rural-Urban categorizations were determined using participant's 5-digit ZIP code entry and designations provided by the Oregon Office of Rural Health (see "Oregon ZIP codes," 2023).

Initial validation of CC measurements were conducted with primarily homogeneous samples (i.e. low SES, urbanite, similarly aged, youth of color; Diemer et al., 2015; Rapa et al., 2020). To negotiate for this variable, I chose to survey MSW students at Portland State University, all of whom currently live in Oregon. This provided a smaller geographic parameter for the study, which helped contain the amount of potential variables included in this sample.

Participants

This study surveyed PSU students enrolled in the MSW program during the 2023-2024 school year. The variety of MSW program delivery methods allowed this study to survey across rural and urban locations, these included: online-only, on-campus (i.e. Portland, Eugene, or Bend), and hybrid (i.e. partially online and partially on-campus; "Academic Program Delivery Methods," n.d.). Inclusion criteria for the final sample were: (1) current student enrolled in the PSU MSW program, (2) currently living in Oregon, (3) over 18 years of age.

The PSU SSW department makes up a fraction of the total student population, with 729 graduate students enrolled in Fall 2021 (including both MSW and PhD programs), and 261 MSW graduating during the 2021-2022 school year ("Social Work: PRRC," 2022). In Fall 2021, the SSW graduate student population self-identified as 84% female and 30% BIPOC. Due to the comparatively small nature of the school , this study involves a small sample size which reduces its overall power.

Data Collection Procedures

The survey (see Appendix B) was distributed to eligible participants electronically using PSU School of Social Work (SSW) MSW 2023-2024 email lists and accepted responses between September 25th and October 10th, 2023. Data were collected electronically (via online survey link using Qualtrics, Version Fall, 2023, (2023). In total, 38 responses were received, of these 23 were complete, 7 were nearly complete, and 8 were incomplete.

Recruitment for the survey was done using a flyer (see Appendix A), which included an image of the survey's quick response (QR) code and the survey link, facilitating access to the questionnaire. Copies of the flyer were physically posted on bulletin boards in the Portland School of Social Work (SSW) building and shared digitally by SSW faculty members. Multiple professors shared the survey opportunity with their students.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis of close-ended questions (and a collapsed version of the open-ended questions) was done using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29 (International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), 2023). Descriptive characteristics of the total sample (n=31) were examined first. Following this, participant responses were categorized by current residential location type (i.e. rural or urban), which was determined using the reported ZIP codes ("Oregon ZIP Codes," 2023)

In an effort to understand the research question, quantitative cross-tabulation analysis was implemented to assess rural-urban location type and CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020) scores. Additional quantitative cross-tabulation analyses were done using current location type and the remaining questions (i.e. all other than the CCS-S, Rapa et al., 2020), with the questions themselves grouped by theme (e.g., voting habits, views on politics, views on government, etc.).

The two open-ended responses later underwent descriptive qualitative analyses with a single-coder. Initial analysis looked at the total samples' response data and searched for common themes and terminology. This process was repeated with responses sorted by current location type.

Results

The survey received 38 attempts, 31 of which made up the total sample. Of the 38 attempts, 23 responses were entirely complete, 7 were nearly complete, and 8 were incomplete. Of the total sample (*n*=31), attrition occurred near the middle of the survey with the first of two written response questions (and following the end of the CCS-S, Rapa et al., 2020), and at the very end of the survey, with the second written response. Most responses were received at the beginning of the response period, with small spikes corresponding to times when faculty reminded students of the survey.

The current residential location type is missing for 1 participant (due to a faulty ZIP code entry). This participants' responses were included in the descriptive characteristics (see Tables 1 and 2) of the total sample (*n*=31), and excluded from quantitative cross-tabulation analyses which categorized response data by location type. Due to the descriptive nature of this quantitative study and relatively small sample size (especially for rural participants, *n*=4), the objective findings are not statistically significant, and therefore point to any causal or corollary relationship.

Geographic Participant Data

The majority of participants (*n*=26, 87%) currently live in urban areas of Oregon and attend PSU on-campus (*n*=25, 81%); 52% (*n*=16) have lived in their current location for 1 year or less, and the majority (*n*=19, 61%) did not grow up in the state (Table 1). For those who

reported spending the majority of their childhood in the state of Oregon (*n=11*), 55% (*n*= 6) did so in urban areas, compared to 46% (*n*= 5) in rural areas. Just one participant who grew up in Oregon reported they plan to return to the location of their youth after they graduate (this location was rural). The majority of participants (*n*=25, 81%) currently attend PSU on-campus.

Table 1

Geographic Data of total sample, N = 31

	n	*M* / %
Current Residential Location*		
Rural	4	13
Urban	26	87
Time in Current Residential Location		
0-1 year	16	52
2-5 years	10	32
6-10 years	5	16
Spent Majority of Youth in Oregon		
No	19	61
Yes	12	39
MSW Program Type		
Online	4	13
On-campus (including Eugene and Bend options)	25	81
Flexible/Hybrid	2	7

Note. M = mean. *Current Residential Location N=30 (1 missing).

Demographics of Study Participants by Location Type

The majority of participants (*n*=24, 86%) reported living in lower to middle-income households (Table 2; income levels described by Bennett et al., 2020). Only urban participants (*n*=13, 62%) reported having lower-income households (i.e. less than $48,500). Additionally, the majority of these households (*n*=9, 43%) were at or below the federal poverty line (per "Poverty Guidelines," 2023). While all rural participants (*n*=4; 100%) reported having a middle-income household (i.e. 48,500 - 145,500; Bennett et al., 2020), only 29% (*n*=6) of urban participants reported the same. Urban participants also reported having more people living on the given household income (33% reported 3 or more people living on the household income, compared to 25 % of rural respondents).

Table 2

Demographics of Study Participants by Rural-Urban Location

	Total Sample (n = 31)		Rural (n = 4)		Urban (n = 26)	
Demographic Variables	n	M / %	n	M / %	n	M / %
Annual Household Income						
Less than $24,860	10	39	0	0	9	43
Somewhere between $24,861 - $48,499	4	8	0	0	4	19
Somewhere between $48,500 - $145,499	10	39	4	100	6	29
Greater than $145,500	2	8	0	0	2	10
Number of People Living on Household Income*						
1 person	7	27	1	17	5	83
2 people	11	42	2	18	9	82
3 people	2	8	0	0	2	100
4 or more people	6	23	1	17	5	83
Highest Education Level Primary Caregiver Has Completed						
High School, High School Equivalent (e.g., GED), or Less	5	20	0	0	5	100
Some College, or Higher	21	80	4	20	16	80

Previously Voted in a State or Federal Election						
No	2	7	0	0	2	100
Yes	24	76	4	18	19	83

Note. M = mean. SD = standard deviation. *Number of People Living on Household Income Total Sample N=26 (5 missing), M=2.27, SD=1.12; Rural (n=4), M=2.25, SD=1.26; Urban (n=21), M=2.33, SD=1.11

All rural participants (*n*=4, 100%) reported their primary caregiver having completed some degree of college or higher; 89% (*n*=16) of urban participants reported their caregiver having completed some amount of college or higher.

The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Stanford, n.d.) was used to check for potential differences in rural-urban perceptions of their social standing (in their current residential location type as well as the PSU SSW). This choice followed literature that suggests rural participants rate their social standings higher on average than their urban-located counterparts. This study's results did not show anything of note, however, therefore further analysis on this topic was forgone.

When asked to describe how location impacts point of view, the majority of total sample (58%, *n*=18) participants gave a response; of these responses, 75% (*n*=3) of the rural participants responded overall, compared to 55% (*n*=15) of the urban participants. On the other hand, when asked to describe how identities impact point of view, the majority of participants (65%, *n*=14) did not respond; of the minority (*n*=11) who did respond to this question, all (100%) reported currently living in an urban area.

A feelings thermometer (see Appendix B) asked participants to rate their feelings toward democrats and republicans on a scale from 0 (as cold and negative as possible) to 10 (as warm and positive as possible), with 5 corresponding to neutral feelings. Overall, the total sample (*n*=26, 5 missing) reported feeling negative toward republicans and positive feelings toward

democrats. Furthermore, the majority urban participants (*n*=14, 67%) reported feeling extremely negative (i.e. 0 to 1) toward republicans, while the majority of rural participants (*n*=3, 75%) reported feelings ranging from 3 to 5. This data corresponds to literature noting political lean correlating to urban-rural location.

In terms of the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS-S; Rapa et al., 2020) overall, the majority of participants scored in the top two levels in regard to critical reflection-perceived inequality (*n*=22, 73%) and critical reflection-egalitarianism (*n*=21, 70%). Scores were a bit lower for critical motivation, with the majority of scores (*n*=20, 67%) in the middle category and higher. On the other hand, the majority of the total sample (*n*=18, 60%) scored in the bottom half for critical action. Overall, this reflects moderately high levels of critical consciousness.

In terms of the relationship between current residential location and levels of CC, the majority of rural participants (*n*=3, 75%) and urban participants (*n*=19, 73%) both scored in the top two levels for critical reflection-perceived inequality. Scores for critical reflection-egalitarianism were split amongst the highest and lowest levels for rural participants, while the majority of urban participants (*n*=19, 73%) also scored in the top two levels here. Turning to critical motivation, the majority of rural participants (*n*=3, 75%) scored amidst the top half, as did the majority of urban participants (*n*=17, 65%). On the other hand, the majority of rural participants (*n*=3, 75%) and urban participants (*n*=3, 75%) both scored amidst the lower-end of the scale. These scores indicate that geographic location was not a key factor related to CC scores.

Discussion

This study found no key difference between rural-urban geographic location and levels of CC (using the CCS-S, Rapa et al., 2020). These results suggest that the rural and urban-located individuals may not be as different as we are told. This corresponds to suggestions from various researchers (e.g. Walsh, 2012; Junod et al., 2020) who have noted that forms of power exploit stereotypes surrounding this topic, which easily "map onto" a variety of social topics (Cole, 2023, p. 431). On the other hand, total CC scores suggesting higher levels for critical reflection and critical motivation combined with lower levels of critical action warrant further research, as these indicate that adequate socio-political action is not being taken relative to individuals' reported levels of critical reflection/awareness and motivation.

Interestingly, the results regarding feelings toward republicans vs. democrats correspond to literature stating location type correlates with political lean (Gimpel et al., 2020; Kelly & Lobao, 2019). However, data from the Pew Research Center (Parker et al., 2018) notes this difference is minimized when controlling for partisanship. Additionally, Cramer (Ripon College Live Events, 2023) describes how rural respondents in her own research feel ignored by the democratic party, and advises they form real connections, centered on listening, in order to heal this.

Strengths & Limitations

Though this study offers many benefits, certain strengths and limitations can be expected. The outcomes of this study have contributed new findings where there currently exists a gap in research: understanding whether there are differences in conceptions of CC based on rural and urban location. Due to the descriptive nature of this quantitative study and relatively small sample size (especially for rural participants), however, the objective findings are not significant, generalizable, nor can they point to any causal or corollary relationship.

The standardized online survey format allowed the study to contact all applicable participants quickly and inexpensively while ensuring methodological consistency. The online self-report format permitted data to be calculated and returns to be monitored automatically and anonymously. The cross-sectional time horizon's 15-day response window allowed for flexibility, thus providing participants the opportunity to complete the survey at their leisure. Moreover, the overall time to complete the survey was relatively short (about 20 minutes) thanks to the purposefully succinct CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020). Though relatively new, the CCS-S (Rapa et al., 2020) allowed this study to quantitatively describe nuanced Social Work topics centered in PSU SSW's mission statement ("About SSW", n.d.) and examine conceptions of CC across geographical location. On the other hand, the survey was disseminated by a PSU SSW faculty member, and therefore still open to desirability bias. Furthermore, convenience sampling may have resulted in a greater number of responses from certain students over others (e.g. students who prefer engaging virtually, students located in Portland who saw the physical flyers in the SSW building). Additionally, the online standardized format may not have guaranteed accurate data (as compared to an in-person interview format) due to potential variations in understanding of language, context, and culture; extraneous variables were not accounted for.

Future Directions

Future research should explore this topic further using a greater sample size, while controlling for additional variables around individual participant context/environment as much as possible. A larger scale version of this study would have the potential for significant findings, potentially unearthing directions to collaborative solutions. Additional open-ended questions should be made in the format of an in-person or virtual interview, with accessibility considerations front of mind; questions should further investigate low levels of critical action

relative to higher levels of critical reflection and motivation, along with participant demographic data types.

Conclusion

Overall, this study found no key differences between rural-urban location and CC scores; this implies that both sides of the rural-urban divide may be more similar than is often described by forms of power (e.g. media, academia; Foucault, 1980). Furthermore, it is important to remember that the rural-urban divide itself offers an umbrella term for a variety of social and cultural issues upon which blame can be projected upon; unfortunately, forms of power will continue to exploit this topic (Cole, 2023) until we collectively understand it.

Uncritiqued forms of power are detrimental to both the oppressed and the oppressor (Foucault, 1980; Freire 1970). While policy solutions may improve some aspects, employing dialogical action (Freire, 1970) gives us an opportunity to collaborate together toward the "struggle for a clearer understanding of dominator culture" (hooks, 2010, p. 37).

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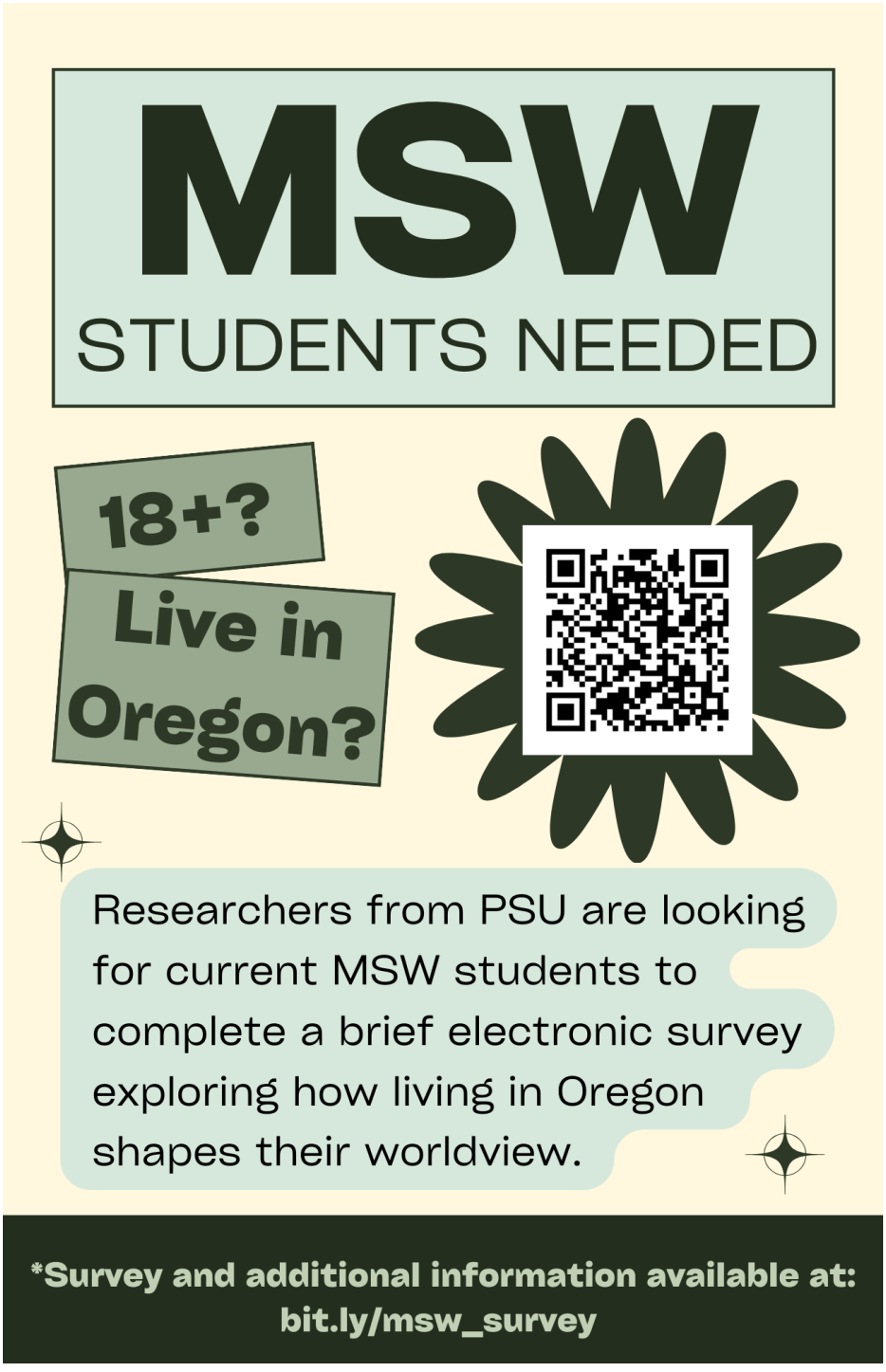
Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer



Appendix B

Electronic Survey Instrument

Eligibility

1. Current PSU MSW program delivery method/cohort:
   - o Online
   - o On-campus (including Eugene and Bend options)
   - o Flexible/Hybrid
   - o Not a current PSU MSW student

2. Do you currently live in Oregon?
   - o Yes
   - o No

3. Are you at least 18 years old?
   - o Yes
   - o No

Rural-Urban Questionnaire

4. What is your current ZIP code?

_____

5. How long have you lived in your current ZIP code?
   - o 0-1 year
   - o 2-5 years
   - o 6-10 years
   - o 11+ years

6. Did you spend the majority of your youth in Oregon?
   - o Yes, in the same ZIP code.
   - o Yes, but in a different ZIP code.
   - o No, I spent the majority of my youth living outside of Oregon.

Display this question if:

6. Did you spend the majority of your youth in Oregon? = Yes, but in a different ZIP code.

6B. What is the ZIP code of the place in Oregon where you spent the majority of your youth?

_____

Display this question if:

6B. What is the ZIP code of the place in Oregon where you spent the majority of your youth? Text Response Is Displayed

6C. Do you plan to return to live in or around this ZIP code after completing your degree?

- o Yes
- o No

Adapted CCS-S*

Questions 7 - 15: Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements. Scale 1-6; 1 (*Strongly disagree*), 2 (*Mostly disagree*), 3 (*Slightly disagree*), 4 (*Slightly agree*), 5 (*Mostly agree*), 6 (*Strongly agree*)

Critical Reflection: Perceived Inequality

7. Certain racial or ethnic groups have fewer chances to get ahead

8. In general, men have greater chances to get ahead

9. Poor people have fewer chances to get ahead

Critical Reflection: Egalitarianism

10. All groups should be given an equal chance in life

11. We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally

Critical Motivation

12. It is important to correct social and economic inequality

13. It is important to confront someone who says something you think is racist or prejudiced

14. It is my responsibility to get involved and make things better for society

15. People like me should participate in the political activity and decision making of our country

Questions 16 - 19: Please select your frequency of participation. Scale 1-5; 1 (*Never did this*), 2 (*Once or twice last year*), 3 (*Once every few months*), 4 (*At least once a month*), 5 (*At least once a week*)

Critical Action: Sociopolitical Participation

16. Participated in a civil rights group or organization

17. Participated in a political party, club, or organization

18. Contacted a public official by phone, mail, or email to tell them how you felt about a particular social or political issue

19. Joined in a protest march, political demonstrations, or political meeting

Rural-Urban Questionnaire Continued

20. If applicable, please describe how your current ZIP code and/or the ZIP code of your youth have impacted your values, beliefs, and/or ways of thinking about the world.

_____

21. What is your total annual household income before taxes? *Please include all forms of income from wages and salaries, money you get from family members living elsewhere, farming, and all other sources.*

- o greater than $145,000
- o somewhere between $48,500 - $145,499
- o somewhere between $24,861 - $48,499
- o Less than $24,860
- o Decline to answer

22. Including yourself, how many people (including children) live on that household income? *Please note, this does not include roommates.*

- o 1
- o 2
- o 3
- o 4+

23. What is the highest level of education your primary caregiver has completed?

- o Less than high school degree
- o High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- o Some college but no degree
- o Associate degree or higher
- o Prefer not to answer

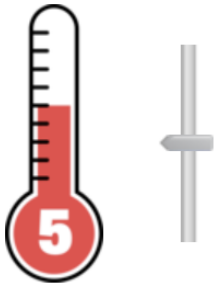
24. Have you previously voted in a state or federal election?

- o Yes
- o No

25. Using the "feeling thermometer" below, please select the number that corresponds to your feelings toward the following U.S. group.

A rating of 0 means you feel as cold and negative as possible. A rating of 10 means you feel as warm and positive as possible. You would rate the group 5 if you don't feel particularly positive or negative toward the group.

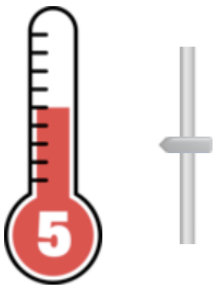
How do you feel toward Republicans? *Select the number between 0 and 10 that reflects your feelings.*



26. Using the "feeling thermometer" below, please select the number that corresponds to your feelings toward the following U.S. group.

A rating of 0 means you feel as cold and negative as possible. A rating of 10 means you feel as warm and positive as possible. You would rate the group 5 if you don't feel particularly positive or negative toward the group.

How do you feel toward Democrats? *Select the number between 0 and 10 that reflects your feelings.*



27. Do you typically vote along party lines?
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Mostly
    - o Rarely

28. Do you feel your political views are currently represented in mainstream U.S. politics?
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Mostly
    - o Rarely

Questions 29 - 35: Please select your level of agreement to the following statements. Scale 1-6; 1 (*Strongly disagree*), 2 (*Mostly disagree*), 3 (*Slightly disagree*), 4 (*Slightly agree*), 5 (*Mostly agree*), 6 (*Strongly agree*)

29. Most people who live in my ZIP code share a similar outlook on life to me.

30. Most people who live in my ZIP code share similar political views to me.

31. The general perspective of the people who live in my ZIP code is reflected in the state government.

32. Overall, I am satisfied with my local government.

33. Overall, I am satisfied with the state government.

34. I have a clear idea of the type of government that would best serve the people living in my ZIP code.

35. I do not want any type of government.

36. Think of this ladder as representing people's social status in your current ZIP code. *In this context, social status refers to your level of influence, social value and/or power relative to those around you; this can include your level of education, employment, and/or any other variable people living in your ZIP code deem socially valuable.*

At the top of the ladder are people who have the highest social status (i.e. those with the highest levels of influence, social value, power, most money, the most education, and/or the most respected jobs). At the bottom are the people who have the lowest standing (i.e. the people who are the worst off – those who have the lowest levels of influence, social value, power, least money, least education, and/or the least respected jobs/no job). The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder?

Please select the rung where you think your social status stands at this time in your life relative to other people in your current ZIP code.

37. Think of this ladder as representing people's social status in the PSU School of Social Work (SSW). *In this context, social status refers to your level of influence, social value and/or power*

relative to those around you; this can include your level of education, employment, and/or any other variable deemed socially valuable within the PSU SSW.

At the top of the ladder are people who have the highest social status (i.e. those with the highest levels of influence, social value, and power). At the bottom are the people who have the lowest standing (i.e. the people who are the worst off – those who have the lowest levels of influence, social value, and/or power). The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder?

Please select the rung where you think your social status stands at this time in your life relative to other people in the PSU SSW.

38. If applicable, please describe how your identities and/or social group membership(s) have impacted your values, beliefs, and/or ways of thinking about the world.

_____

**Note.* Questions 7 - 19 adapted from the Short Critical Consciousness Scale (*CCS-S),* by Rapa et al., 2020.