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Young, Educated and Choosing Rural: An Exploration of the Factors Related to Young Adults Choosing to Move to Remote Rural Communities

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Abstract

With many rural communities facing uncertain futures due to aging and dwindling populations, it is of interest to explore what these communities have to offer young adults. The current case study was designed to explore the experiences of educated young adults moving to remote rural communities in Montana. While the young adults noted challenges such as a lack of amenities and geographic and social isolation, participants highlighted the quality of life they experience in their rural communities including the family-centered environment, low cost of living, the unconditional support provided by community members, intergenerational friendships, increased sociability, and the unique opportunities for personal and professional growth available for young adults in rural communities. Furthermore, participants shared suggestions for enticing young adults to move to rural communities, including ways they could increase occupational opportunities, market to young adults, and change the message about living in rural areas.

Keywords: young adults, rural communities, opportunities

1.0 Introduction

As rural communities across the United States face aging populations and an exodus of young adults, rural communities face uncertain futures. In several nonmetropolitan communities in the mid-west, not only have young adults been moving away, but populations have decreased in size, and community services have declined (Jacquet, Guthrie, & Jackson 2017; Peters, 2019; Polèse & Shearmur 2006). Previous research has examined reasons why individuals stay, leave, and return to their communities in young adulthood (Cromartie, Von Reichert, & Arthun,

2015; Johnson, Winkler, & Rogers, 2013; Ulrich-Schad, Henly, & Safford, 2013; Theodori, & Theodori, 2015), but there is a lack of research examining why nonresident individuals move to rural communities. The current case study was designed to explore the experiences of young adults who moved to a rural community following university graduation.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

A life course theoretical framework was selected to guide this study on the experiences of university-educated young adults who moved to rural communities. According to Elder, Kirkpatrick, and Crosnoe (2003) life course perspective is based on five principles including: *life-span development* (i.e., development is lifelong—development does not end at age 18), *agency* (i.e., people "construct their own life course through choices and actions" within the constraints of their social circumstance. p.11), *time and place* (i.e., an individual's life course exists in and is shaped by the historical time period and places with which they come in contact), *timing* (i.e., "the developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life" p. 12), and *linked lives* (i.e., people exist within interdependent relationships and "socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships." p. 13). Research focusing on the life course "typically does not address all five principles, but all of them are central to the life course paradigm" (Elder & George, 2016, p.63).

Life course theory uses a biographical context to look at social pathways, which are defined as "trajectories of education and work, family and residences that are followed by individuals and groups through society" (Elder et al., 2003, p.8). According to White and Corbett (2014), "the life course approach is especially relevant in rural settings because it requires the researcher to record people's lived experiences" (p.47). Life course theory has been used to explore various experiences of rural adolescents and young adults such as the educational and occupational plans of rural adolescents (Van Gundy et al., 2016) and the decision to remain in their home communities among rural young adults (Stockdale, Theunissen, & Haartsen, 2018). This research uses the life course principles of agency, time and place, timing, and linked lives as a foundation for understanding the experiences of young adults in this study.

3.0 Outmigrants and Return Migrants

In order to understand why young adults are not moving to rural communities, it is important to understand why these individuals are exiting in the first place. Sense of community, community attachment, and educational aspirations have been identified as significant predictors of youth wanting to migrate from their rural communities (Theodori, & Theodori, 2015). In an extensive study, von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun (2011) interviewed over 300 stayers, outmigrants, and return migrants from 21 different communities at their 10, 20, and 30-year high school reunions. Reasons for returning to their home community or not were related to family, employment opportunities, and community assets. Returners were more likely to cite a desire to return to a small town if they had strong family ties, wanted to raise their children near family, and were seeking the benefits of a small town environment. Strong community ties also strongly predicted whether an individual would return. Further, individuals are more likely to return to their communities if they value and were comfortable with the social aspects of small towns (e.g., tight-knit networks, little privacy) and did not mind the lack of big-city amenities (Cromartie et al., 2015). Returners impacted the demographic, economic, and social landscapes of the rural community. The authors

concluded that rural labor markets, notably the low wages, affect the ability to live in rural communities—many times, returners make career sacrifices in order to live in rural communities (Cromartie et al., 2015).

Occupational opportunities are a noted barrier to individuals wanting to live in rural communities (Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Cromartie et al., 2015; von Reichert et al., 2011). For example, there are some occupations not readily available in rural communities, "rural towns, ranging in size from 1,200 and even up to 10,000, simply offer very limited opportunities for specialized physicians, scientists, corporate accountants, and similar occupations" (von Reichert et al., 2011, p. 41). This lack of some occupations being available in rural communities, particularly deters individuals with higher educational levels because of the lack of career opportunities. In fact, Ulrich-Schad and colleagues (2013) identified that younger, educated people still plan to leave rural areas (although they could be moving to other rural communities) regardless of community attachment levels.

4.0 Migration Patterns of Young Adults

Young adults in their twenties leave rural communities. In contrast, young adults in their thirties show higher levels of immigration (Johnson & Winkler, 2015) with young adults leaving rural communities for the "social, lifestyle, and economic opportunities" available in urban areas (Johnson & Winkler, & Rogers, 2013, p.2). It is important to note that rural places are not monolithic (Hamilton, Hamilton, Duncan, & Colocousis, 2008; Ulrich-Schad, & Duncan, 2018). There are some rural places that are more or less enticing to young adults. For example, "amenity-rich areas, meanwhile, are attracting a cohort of newcomers" and specifically "young professional families looking for jobs and safe environments in which to raise families" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 3). Unfortunately, rural communities with fewer scenic amenities have not experienced an influx of young adults. Cromartie and colleagues (2015) noted that rural, remote counties with relatively low scenic amenities typically lost 20 to 24-year-olds to outmigration at nearly twice the rates seen in other rural counties. However, these areas also recorded higher immigration among 30- to 34-year-olds and young children. Return migration likely plays a large role in these migration trends with these counties making up a fraction of the population lost in the years after high school by attracting returnees and their families (Cromartie et al., 2015).

It is worthwhile to investigate factors related to young adults' desires to move to rural areas, notably those with fewer scenic amenities that have been experiencing lower levels of young adult immigration; specifically in need of investigation are, the occupational structures that allow young adults to move to rural towns following graduation. Economic opportunities are important motivators for young adults. Ferguson, Ali, Olfert, and Partridge (2007) explored how local amenities, economic factors, and agglomeration economies affect population change. The authors suggested that economic variables were the most influential among rural young adults. However, in a recent study, Wolfe, Black, and Welser (2019) interviewed 20 young adults and found that economic reasons alone were "insufficient for explaining decisions to stay in a place long term." (p.15). These young adults highlighted the need for emotional connections specifically citing three elements: "(1) access to local stocks of knowledge; (2) direct invitations to participate in community life; and, perhaps most importantly, (3) responsibilities and obligations in the community" (p.15). Building

on this research, it is important to explore how economic and community factors relate to young adults' decisions to move to rural communities.

Currently, "few if any economic development strategies exist to slow or reverse the outmigration of rural youth. One way of countering this demographic loss is to look for ways to boost in-migration" (von Reichert et al., 2011, p.36). MacMichael, Beazley, Kevany, Looker, and Stiles (2015) interviewed four young female in-migrants (ranging in age from 22-36) and found that quality of life, life course (raising kids, community, safety, and schooling), the physical landscape/amenities, economic, and employment aspects were motivating factors for the young adults to move to rural communities. Further, whether or not participants planned to stay in rural communities depended on employment, where they were in their life course, and potential changes to the community such as school closures. MacMichael and colleagues (2015) observed:

> While the scholarship on out-migration provides academics, policy makers, and community leaders with greater understanding of why youth may be leaving, it does not explain real or potential motivations for the small number of young people moving into or returning to rural communities. This knowledge could aid in the development of strategies to attract and retain more young people. (p.37).

The failure of communities to attract young adults can have lasting impacts and "the sustained loss of young people from farm counties has long been a significant policy concern because it represents a loss of human resources and diminishes the potential for future growth" (Johnson et al., 2013, p.2).

As rural areas aim to attract young adults, it is important to explore how young adults view rural communities. Homan, Hedrick, Dick, and Light (2014) interviewed young adults (ages 25-34) to explore their perceptions of their rural community. Participants perceived that their rural communities were safe, affordable, a good place to raise a family, and had quality schools. In terms of reported challenges of living in their rural communities, participants reported that there was a lack of cultural activities, employment opportunities, and recreational activities.

5.0 Purpose of the Current Study

As rural sociologists, geographers, educators, and policy- makers search to understand the rural "Brain Drain" (Ulrich-Schad et al. 2013) this study looked at factors related to in-migration among young adults in Montana. This study is unique because, rather than focusing on return migrants, it focuses on young adults who are not originally from the rural community in which they are currently living. This research focused on educated young adults, the demographic least likely to move to a rural community, in order to examine how they are implementing their education and advancing their careers while living in a rural town. The following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What are the experiences of educated young adults living in rural communities?

> 2. What do young educated adults perceive to be the benefits of relocating to a new rural community?

6.0 Methods

6.1 Design

A qualitative case study approach was selected for this study because gathering in-depth information in the language of the participants leads to a deeper understanding of the subtle factors influencing participants in their decision making (Tsang, 2014). Critical to case study design is defining the case and determining the boundaries of the case (Yin, 2014). The boundaries of the current case were defined in terms of age, academic degree, and location. This case was bound by including individuals who were young adults (defined as ages 25-29) and had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The case further relied on protocols similar to von Reichert and colleagues (2011; 2015) to focus on participants who were from geographically isolated communities with moderate to low natural amenities (in or adjacent to the Hi-Line of Montana) and who were not returning to a rural community they previously lived, but who were new to a rural community.

The study took place in rural Montana. In 2017, Montana had a population of 1.05 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Known as *Big Sky Country* (Share America, 2016), it is the fourth largest state and third least densely populated state in the United States (National Network of Libraries of Medicine, 2019). As previously stated, the case boundary, in terms of location, was the Hi-Line of Montana (the northernmost highway in the state running east to west; Vichorek, 1993). Historically, the Hi-Line followed the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe (BNSF) railway (connecting Minneapolis to Seattle). The Montana Hi-Line is characterized by wide-open spaces, agriculturally based communities, and extends approximately 130 miles along a two-lane highway. Schools are important to the vitality of the rural communities, and on the Hi-Line, there has been a large number of school consolidations (e.g., Associated Press, 2004) within the past 20-30 years. Referred to as a *Frontier Area* (i.e., remote, small population, large distances to population centers, and far from necessities [e.g., healthcare, schools, and other necessities]; Rural Health Information Hub, 2018), the Hi-Line's location (notably the distance from suburban communities in the state) and stark remoteness make it a unique case.

6.2 Sample

The sample consisted of nine young adults (n=6 female; n=2 male; m_{age}= 26.5) living in six different rural communities located in six different counties along the Montana Hi-Line. Participants in the study were all from counties experiencing moderate to large amounts (-10.3 to-44.9) of negative net migration among 25-29-year-olds (Winkler et al., 2013). Communities ranged in size from 900 to 9,700 people. Participants all identified as Caucasian, and all were currently employed. In terms of educational status, seven reported having earned bachelor's degrees, and two had earned master's degrees. Complete participant characteristics are included in Table 1.

Table 1: *Rural Young Adults Self-Reported Demographic Information (N=9)*

Name*	Gender	Age	Grew up in Montana	Family Status	Degree	Occupation	Community Population**
Cara	Female	29	Yes	Married with one young child	Bachelor's degree in business administration	Realtor	9,700***
Casey	Male	26	Yes	Married with two small children	Bachelor's degree in diesel technology	Trade School Instructor	9,700***
Cassandra	Female	26	No	Married	Bachelor's degree in history/anthropology	Marketing Coordinator	3,400
Clark	Male	26	No	Married to Tina	Bachelor's degree in business/economics	Military	1,700
Johanna	Female	25	No	Lives with boyfriend	Bachelor's degree in English-teaching focus	Secondary Instructor	1,500
Lilly	Female	26	Yes	Married	Bachelor's degree in communications/public relations	Marketing Director/Business Owner	3,000
Molly	Female	29	No	Married with two small children	Master's degree in education-math education	Secondary Instructor	900
Renae	Female	27	No	Married with one young child	Master's degree in physician assistant studies	Physician Assistant	900
Tina	Female	25	No	Married to Clark	Bachelor's degree in communications	Reporter/Editor	1,700

* These are pseudonyms
** These are approximations in an effort to protect community and participant anonymity
***This community is considered rural because of its geographical isolation. It is over 100 miles from a suburban community with almost 60,000 people.

6.3 *Data Collection and Analysis*

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board. The sampling procedure should focus on reaching the specific research objectives (Putra & Pedersen, 2018), and to identify participants within the case purposive and snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2012) were employed. As a starting point, one researcher reached out to contacts in a remote rural community on the Hi-Line of Montana and through the University's Extension Office. Participants were notified of the study; then interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone, depending on participant preference. For each participant, data were collected using two sources (i.e., work/life maps and structured interviews). Although there is not a specific recommended number of participants for case studies (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014), participants were recruited until data saturation (i.e., when no new ideas emerge in the data collection process signaling that no additional participants are needed) (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012) was reached. Participants received a $25 gift card that they could use in their community as an incentive for participation. Interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.

When conducting case study research, it is important for researchers to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Cho & Trent, 2006). In this study, construct validity was established by using multiple sources of evidence (i.e., work/life maps and structured interviews), and member checking was incorporated by having participants review results for accuracy (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2014). Additionally, one researcher who was trained in doing qualitative interviews completed the interviews to ensure procedural consistency across the interviews.

To explore educated young adults' experiences in rural communities, the analysis process began by two researchers independently examining the life maps to explore factors related to the decision making of young adults choosing to move to rural communities. Life maps were utilized to prompt participants into defining the prominent geographic changes in their lives and the motivations for these moves. Participants were instructed to map each of the major professional and geographic changes in their lives, including time frames, locations, and reasons for the shift. The researchers then used these maps to evaluate for themes in line to those defined later in the research process.

The two researchers then met to discuss regularities in the data and identified a common structure to write case descriptions for each participant. Consistent with case study analysis (Vaterlaus, Cottle, Patton, & Gibbons, 2018), one researcher constructed individual case descriptions for each participant that detailed their reasons for moving to a rural community, experiences in a rural community, and plans for the future. A second researcher reviewed the case descriptions in association with the raw data to check for accuracy. Following this process, the two researchers independently immersed themselves in the case descriptions to identify similarities and differences among participants. As suggested by Yin (2014), the two researchers then met, and uniform categories were identified. In order to analyze responses across participants, a word table was created for each uniform category that included information (i.e., work/life maps and structured interviews) from each participant. The two researchers then reviewed the word tables, and five themes emerged. The researchers determined descriptive information needed to be presented prior to thematic presentation in order to provide context to the themes.

7.0 Results

7.1 Descriptive Information

The results in this case study are derived from the experiences and perceptions of nine young adults with bachelor's degrees living in geographically rural areas. When asked why they moved to a rural community, all of the participants either had experience living in a rural community previously or had some affinity for rural communities. Participants reported living in their communities for an average of three years. Five of the participants were not living in their own home community but were living in the community in which their spouse or partner was raised. One of the participants, Renae, was on a student loan repayment program, but said she "would have chosen rural no matter what."

When prompted to describe the community in which they live, several participants highlighted the importance of agriculture and how the community revolves around the farming season, highlighting that the region was "land rich, money poor" and that many of the residents have been in the community for generations. Three participants mentioned cultural aspects of their community, including their proximity to reservations, the influence of Native Americans, and one participant noted racism directed at Native Americans in their community. Communities were described as traditional (n=2) and welcoming (n=4). Communities were pronounced by their open spaces, slower pace, the relaxed and laid-back atmosphere (e.g., "everybody is down to earth...it is not a fast-paced lifestyle" [Tina]), and the isolation of their community ("nobody drives through [his community] going anywhere" [Casey]). The people in their communities were described as "not as conservative as people would predict" (Johanna) and "incredibly gritty, kind of hard-working, and traditional family valued people" (Casey).

Participants were asked about their plans for five, ten, and twenty years from now. Seven[1] of the participants planned to stay in their current community for the next five years, and six of the participants planned to stay in their current community for ten years. Renae, who originally moved to her community for a federal student loan reimbursement program, plans to stay for five to ten years then plans to move abroad. Johanna plans to stay in her current community or move to a rural community in the Northeastern United States. Interestingly, when asked about their plans for twenty years from the time of the interview, several participants (n=5) mentioned changes in occupation and or location as they move closer retirement.

7.2 Themes

Five themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. First, participants highlighted an investment in people and communities. Second, participants mentioned challenges and barriers to living in rural communities. Third, participants talked about the quality of life in rural communities. Fourth, they highlighted how they are experiencing personal and professional growth while living in rural communities. Finally, participants addressed opportunities for rural communities.

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[1] Two of the participants do not have a choice in where they will be living due to military obligations. They have talked about returning to the rural community they currently live in once Clark's military service is complete.

Investment in people and communities. Almost all participants mentioned positive support (*n*=8), specifically citing a caring and close-knit atmosphere (*n*=8), as well as monetary support for people and organizations (*n*=6) within the rural communities in which they resided. For instance, Tina stated:

> If somebody gets sick or injured, and they need a fundraiser, or a benefit or something. This town does such a good job of organizing, and it's one of the towns where people might have grudges for 20 years because they have lived beside each other their whole life, but all that gets kind of put aside when there's somebody to help out and that's just something that really struck me.

Echoing the sentiment, Lily stated:

> I'd be interested to see the numbers, but how much of a percentage of a paycheck goes to community, whether it's to their church, or to the food pantry or the million different donations you're at or on a weekly basis, the people spend a lot of their money for causes in the community that they feel like are important to them. And also, scholarships. My husband graduated with no debt, and he got more scholarships than I did. And that most of those are just local grown scholarships from people in coming.

All participants (*n*=9) mentioned the importance of relationships with others in their community, and some (*n*=5) specifically stated that there was an expectation of treating people well. Johanna disclosed:

> That person's rude to me, but I feel like I can't say anything because they are related to so and so or Oh God, I'm gonna have to see them again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, so I have to be polite all the time when I think sometimes people don't deserve that.

A majority of participants (*n*=8) reported that the clear social expectations within their communities did require work but culminated in positive relationships. Casey stated, "The way people treated each other in the grocery store, kind of a sense of community. Because it takes everybody working together to make it work."

Within their rural communities, five participants mentioned that the environment facilitated the ability to develop deep friendships and allowed them to feel "known" (*n*=4) in their community. For example, Renae said, "What my husband and I have noticed we've made way more friends in the last year and a half, than we ever did in three, four years, living in [a different state]." Further, Lilly mentioned the opportunities for multi-generational friendships in rural communities. "We don't have friends that are only in their 20s, we have friends in their 40s, we have friends that are without kids, single, married….so our lives are richer for that."

Some participants (*n*=4) said that living in rural communities has forced them out of their comfort zones socially. For instance, Johanna explained, "living here has actually forced me to be more social."

Challenges and barriers. Each participant (*n*=9) mentioned that they had experienced some challenges due to living in a rural community. One of the major challenges related to the geographic isolation that young adults (*n*=7) experienced, which led to a lack of access to events and amenities seen in more urban environments. Renae explained, "If we want to go to a movie, that's five hours to go to the better movies, right? It's an hour there, three hours for the movie and an hour back, so that's a long time." Similarly, Lilly stated: "I would say access to events and stores, things like that. You gotta drive an hour and a half to do something. That's just part of life here." This geographic isolation led to fewer options for daily amenities, and participants felt no option but to purchase more expensive goods simply due to proximity.

The isolation also extended into the personal relationships of participants. As noted by Cassandara, "I know especially for single people I've heard it's very hard to meet people." Moreover, participants also mentioned the difficulty of establishing a strong peer group (*n*=4) due to the aging demographic of these communities, or the initial "outsider status" they inhabited as transplants to these communities. Clark elaborated:

> It takes a while for people to accept you and get to know you. There is a, I don't want to say prejudice, but maybe that's the best word to use, against newcomers coming into the community. This might not be intentional, it's just the fact that I think people are more comfortable with what they know.

Quality of life. Participants (*n*=9) did perceive that they achieved a positive quality of life through living in rural communities. Participants highlighted that quality of life was related to family opportunity, safety, and affordability. The perception of a close-knit atmosphere promoted ideals of safety and "being cared for," which led to a perception of rural communities being family-centric environments. A majority of participants (*n*=8) believed rural communities to be an ideal environment for raising families. The one participant who did not discuss this topic did not have children, though two other participants without children saw rural communities as positive environments for child-rearing. Clark stated, "I feel like it's a great opportunity for kids because we have kids who can just ride their bikes down the street with no fear of traffic, or strangers, or anything like that." Similarly, Molly stated:

> I guess, it's more perspective for my children, but with my children being how young they are, community will help them. They will grow up in this community, and through living in this community, they will be watched over, and protected more so than I would say, in a bigger community. So, my young adult perception is about my children as this point in life."

Cassandra, who does not have children, noted her community was "Family oriented-you can take time off." Lilly, who had previously lived in a large metropolitan area

said, "We would never want to raise our kids in somewhere in the city." This perception was connected to an ideal of rural communities having lower crime rates and being safer environments overall.

Most participants (*n*=7) found that living in rural communities was affordable and provided a quality of life that was preferable to those in more urban communities. Renae emphasized, "You save money, because it's cheaper to live rural. And as a young person who went to college, we have a lot of student debts that we have to pay off." Similarly, Johanna stated, "The house has been in [my partner's] family for so long, that we don't have to pay a mortgage or anything like that, to live there. I can live really comfortably in [town]."

Personal and professional growth. Among participants, seven specifically utilized their degree in their profession in the rural community. For the two that did not, one actively chose to work outside the scope of their education. Young adults (*n* =5) perceived rural communities to offer many opportunities for personal and professional growth. In some instances, participants thought that rural environments increased professional opportunities. Renae stated, "I think it has made me a more well-rounded practitioner because I am doing so many things." Furthermore, Lilly found that her rural environment to allowed her to achieve more than would be possible in an urban environment. She disclosed:

> My goal was always to open up some type of retail, I would have been in my 30s by the time I got to start that somewhere else, but here I'm able to do it at 26. I've had dreams come true, in the last six months that I probably would have never had any other place.

Living in a rural community also allowed participants to enjoy their environment (e.g., "Here I've kinda learned to slow down and it's made me appreciate nature more" [Tina]). In addition to nature, participants noted that the amount of unstructured free time in rural communities allowed them to pursue meaningful activities and interests. Johanna explained, "I love yoga and I do yoga all the time, because I have time for it, and because I have that level of boredom that allows me to space to cultivate that."

Opportunities for Rural Communities. As outsiders to these particular rural communities, participants (*n* =9) identified possible solutions for rural communities with declining populations. Participants (*n*=5) saw opportunities for rural communities to focus more on job creation and expansion of industries available in rural areas. This increased focus included ideas related to promoting professional positions through telecommuting, to market the appeal of jobs/industries already in the area, and to highlight the amenities the community already has to offer. For example, Cara recommended focusing on identifying or developing:

> Quality high paying jobs, even if you could push the tele-commuting. While living in this town you're not losing out on those jobs, but you get the benefits of being in a small area while still having your career and whatever it is you wanna do.

Salary was also mentioned as a way to entice young adults to move to a rural community. Renae suggested, "Pay young adults more money. I think because you have to have a specific personality to want to live in a small town, so if you don't have that personality, then it has to be offset by something."

Participants (*n*=5) described a need to advertise the professional and personal benefits of rural living as a tactic to overcome the commonly held narrative of rural living to be undesirable or taking a job in a rural community is a deficit to professional growth. Lilly elaborated:

> I think we spend so much time talking about why people aren't moving that
>
> we have never really given the conversation of why people enjoy it or why
>
> people would enjoy it. A huge misconception is that people here are not
>
> proud to live here or actively choosing to live here.

Beyond changing the message, Clark suggested changing how communities advertise positions:

> They really need to advertise those positions to people who are not local.
>
> Partly because of having an aging population, they're not really sure all the
>
> time, how to connect with this younger audience. I feel like is a big part of
>
> the problem.

Some young adults (*n*=4) in this study also identified a need to build social connections among peers in the community. Johanna suggested, "Towns can have options and opportunities for young people like cute coffee shops and outdoor opportunities and events. As artificial as it sounds but I think it really is valuable to somebody young." Cassandra highlighted how this issue could be overcome by young adults already living in the community. She stated:

> People living there could create activities. This would be more for us to do
>
> not any organization or any people, but for those of us who have come here
>
> to start little groups to start book clubs to start ways to meet people.

8.0 Discussion

In contrast to previous research examining young adults returning to their home communities, the current study focused on the experiences of educated young adults who chose to move to a new rural community. Participants shared perceived benefits and challenges to living in rural communities, along with suggestions for how rural communities can attract more young people to move there. Results are discussed in relation to existing research on young adult migration to rural communities and life course theory.

8.1 Investment in People and Communities

One of the themes that emerged from this research was the clear community support young adults both witnessed and experienced while living in their rural communities. Participants mentioned the relationships and friendships they have

made in the community as stronger, or more involved, than those they had created elsewhere. Participants also noted social expectations, such as the need to treat people well since you will continue to interact with them often. The results of this study support a key principle of life course theory that focuses on the importance of linked lives and the idea that "human lives cannot be adequately represented when removed from relationships" (Elder et al., 2003, p. 13).

The experience of living in a rural community facilitated more linked lives— participants highlighted how living in a rural community has encouraged them to be more social and extroverted toward others. This finding was unexpected, and one that has not been extensively reported in previous peer-reviewed research. This increased sociability supports research by the Pew Research Center that has reported that rural residents are more likely than urban and suburban residents to know their neighbors (Parker et al., 2018). This phenomenon has not only been reported among young adults in rural communities but in older demographics as well. Henning-Smith, Moscovice, and Kozhimannil (2019) interviewed individuals between the ages of 57-85 and found that "older adults and their spouses/partners in rural areas have larger and stronger social networks than their urban peers" (p. 545). These micropolitan rural residents were also recorded to have a greater number of strong relationships, were more likely to see these relationships as ones they could rely on and reported lower levels of loneliness.

8.2 Challenges and Barriers

Participants mentioned that there were challenges living in rural communities such as geographic isolation and lack of access to amenities and events. In addition to geographic isolation, participants discussed experiencing social disconnect upon arriving in rural communities. This feeling of an "outsider status" supports previous research by Wolfe et al. (2019), who found that:

> The general frustration expressed is that, although they get the sense that
> there is a strong bond among community members and people … are
> friendly, [but] these participants feel as though they are on the outside of
> that tightly woven interior (p.17).

Participants of this current study also stated a difficulty in establishing a peer group, as well as an initial hesitancy by local residents to accept newcomers again highlighting the importance of linked lives, a principle of life course theory (Elder et al., 2003).

A common theme among participants was a desire for more events and amenities offered by local businesses and organizations. This supports previous research by Homan et al. (2014), who surveyed young adults and found that "fun and interesting activities" and "enough cultural activities" were rated with some of the lowest in levels of satisfaction. Similarly, O'Shea, Southgate, Jardine, & Delahunty (2019) found that young rural residents reported a feeling of perpetual boredom, as a result of limited amenities and activities within the geographic area.

From a life course perspective, the desire for events and amenities may be explained by the principle of time and place (Elder et al., 2003). Although people of all ages may find events and amenities important, they may be notably imperative for young adults coming of age during a time of social media and social comparison. When

compared to all adults, young adults are the most frequent users of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Some emerging research has indicated that young adults use social media to generate FoMO (fear of missing out) in others (Hetz, Dawson, & Cullen, 2015). With the pervasiveness of social media, young adults moving to rural communities may be aware of the events and activities their friends living in larger communities are attending. This could be a helpful future research direction to see if social media does play a role in the perceptions of amenities available in rural communities among professional young adults. However, as young adults age, close proximity to events and amenities may become less important as they transition into other stages of their lives.

Although rural communities were perceived to have a lack of cultural and entertainment events, residents found the access to nature and the outdoors as a point of interest. In MacMichael et al.'s (2015) study with young female in-migrants, they reported that physical landscape/amenities were motivating factors for the young adults to move to rural communities. Ferguson et al. (2007) indicated that a rising demand for a clean environment, beautiful vistas, and abundant recreation opportunities could play a significant role in rural communities. For this study, communities were chosen for their relative lack of outdoor recreation industry, yet an affinity for the access to public lands and nature was still mentioned by participants.

8.3 Quality of Life

When exploring what rural communities can offer young rural newcomers, participants discussed the quality of life available in rural communities. Like research on rural returners (von Reichert et al. 2011), the results of this investigation highlight how the quality of life influences young adults' decision to move to rural communities. Specifically, participants, even those without children, mentioned the benefits of raising families in a small town. Participants stated many benefits associated with the small environment and a desire for their children to stay in that community for the duration of their school years. Consistent with previous research (von Reichert., 2011; von Reichert, Cromartie, & Arthun, 2014), five participants in the current study chose to move to their partners' community citing the benefit of raising children near family.

Participants in this study talked about the perception that rural communities were safer than urban communities. This supports previous research by MacMichael et al. (2015), who mentioned how quality of life, notably the ability to raise kids, safety, and schooling, influenced young adults' desires to move to a rural community. The desire for safety supports the life course principle of time and place as individuals are influenced by historical context and place (Elder et al., 2003). Existing research indicates that higher media consumption is associated with elevated perceptions of risk of crime or anxiety about crime (Callanan, 2012; Roche, Pickett, & Gertz, 2016). In a time when extreme acts of violence in the news and on social media may cause people to feel less safe, the perception (whether it is true or not) of safety in rural communities may be appealing to young adults.

In terms of the cost of living in rural communities, there are contradictory findings regarding whether or not rural communities have a lower cost of living (Kurre, 2003; Zimmerman, Ham, & Frank, 2008). Participants in this study found rural communities to be affordable places to live. Again, this connects with the time and place principle within life course theory (Elder et al., 2003). As the cost of higher

education has increased (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010), many contemporary young adults are incurring high student loan debt (Lee, Lee, & Kim, 2019). As young adults are situated in a time with high student debt, the perceived affordability of a rural community could be appealing.

8.4 Personal and Professional Growth

Most of the participants in this study were working in their field of study, which stands in contrast to previous research highlighting the career sacrifices required to live in a rural community (Cromartie et al., 2015). The results of this study suggest that depending on their field of study, individuals may be able to live in rural communities without sacrificing their occupational goals or the investment they made in higher education. Moreover, participants felt fulfilled by their professional opportunities. In line with previous research (Vazzana & Rudi-Polloshka, 2019), in some instances, participants felt that rural environments provided more outlets for professional growth than urban communities. Whereas professionals in urban environments are competing with large numbers of applicants with similar skill sets, young professionals in rural communities felt that there were unique in the skill sets they offered rural communities and, therefore, more valued as professionals.

While participants mentioned a lack of entertainment as a challenge to living in a rural community, some used this as a catalyst for personal growth. Participants specifically mentioned how the relative lack of formal entertainment events available in their rural towns allowed them to reallocate the time they may have used on the events to cultivate personal hobbies and interests. Rural communities offer young adults the time and space to pursue their interests. The opportunities for personal growth mentioned by young adults in this study highlight the life course principle of agency (Elder et al., 2003). Young adults in this study are actively choosing to live in rural communities and see the communities as avenues for personal and professional enrichment.

8.5 Opportunities for Rural Communities

Participants talked about the importance of building social connections within the community. This finding corroborates previous research by Wolfe et al. (2019), who highlighted the "need for emotional connections" among young adults moving to a rural community. Facilitating these connections could occur through community events, church activities, book clubs, parenting groups, etc. Building on the life course principle of linked lives, there is a need for social connections among rural young adults.

Along with strong social connections, rural young adults need to see occupational opportunities and reputable salary in rural communities. In line with the life course theory, they need to feel a sense of agency in their professional lives (Elder et al., 2003). Supporting previous research highlighting the importance of employment in decisions to move to rural communities (Cromartie et al., 2015; MacMichael et al., 2015) participants thought that diversity in job opportunities (notably through telecommuting) and increased salaries could attract young adults to move to a rural community. The results of this study support the call for an "increase in high skilled jobs with competitive compensation" in rural communities (Vazzana & Rudi-Polloshka, 2019, p. 229). To alter the current trend in population loss, educated young adults need to see occupational opportunities in rural communities.

Participants in this study also talked about revising how rural communities currently advertise available employment opportunities. Specifically, participants indicated that there was a need to change the method of advertising to be more aligned with how young adults search for jobs. The participants of this study suggested a change in both medium and message. Similar to advertising initiatives designed to attract individuals to "return home," marketing is needed that will focus on the positive aspects and opportunities available in rural communities (Homan et al., 2014). It is clear that rural communities are able to provide a variety of employment opportunities available. These communities must now adjust their communication and marketing to connect with young people looking for employment outside of the local community.

Similarly, participants highlighted the need to change the narrative of living in a rural community from one of a deficit perspective to a discussion of what rural communities have to offer young adults. In focusing on the life course principles of time and place coupled with agency (Elder et al., 2003), there is a need to emphasize opportunities for young adults in rural communities. O'Shea and colleagues (2019) highlighted how current perceptions of social mobility devalue rural areas in favor of urbanized environments, therefore encouraging young people to avoid staying in rural communities. As noted by a participant in this study, there is often an assumption that young adults are not actively choosing to live in rural communities, rather they are there because they lack options or the ability to move to a larger community. This deficit perspective could impact the likelihood of individuals choosing to apply for occupations in rural communities, regardless of the actual appeal of the position itself. Young adults need to know about the benefits and opportunities rural communities have to offer in order to make more informed decisions.

9.0 Limitations and Conclusions

There are limitations to the current study. First of all, this case study took place in remote rural communities in Northern Montana; therefore, generalizability is not possible, nor was it the intent of this research. Demographically, this study was limited. A majority of the sample identified as Caucasian and in a relationship (eight of the participants were married, and one was in a serious relationship). It is also worth noting that seven of the nine participants in this study were female. It is acknowledged that these factors may have influenced the participants' views on living in rural communities. Furthermore, although not living in their own community, five of the participants were living in the community in which their significant other was raised, thus, potential providing networks of support were not available to individuals without families in town. Sample selection was also limited to purposive and snowball sampling, which may have resulted in participants all possessing similar opinions and perspectives.

Future research would benefit from a longitudinal case study with participants being surveyed again in five, 10, and 20 years to gauge whether their initial predictions of future plans were accurate. Topics such as the increased amount of time to pursue hobbies were not found to be mentioned in current literature; therefore, future studies could be conducted to analyze whether those in rural areas possess more unstructured free time than urban peers. Another theme from this study not found in current research is the amount of professional opportunities participants felt were

present in these communities. More research will be needed to determine if this is accurate in other rural communities.

Overall, this exploratory case study utilizes life course theory to provide several important insights into the decision making of young adults choosing to move to remote rural communities in Montana. The majority of the participants in this study were able to utilize their education while living in a rural setting. In addition to challenges in living in a rural area, participants highlighted their experiences that included an investment in people and communities, a quality of life experienced in their rural town, opportunities for personal and professional growth, and opportunities for rural communities. This research provides a foundation for future research and conversations around what rural communities can do to attract young adults, thus, ensuring their livelihood for generations to come.

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