RURAL IDENTITY IN A MIXED RURAL-URBAN SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT:

INVESTIGATING RURAL COLLEGE STUDENT IDENTITY AND HOW IT CHANGES DURING THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

by

Lisa Handke

An Abstract
of a thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Communication and Sociology University of Central Missouri

May, 2012
ABSTRACT

by

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One’s sense of identity is derived greatly from the environment and cultural group in which one has grown up. The field of intercultural communication examines different cultures’ social codes for behavior and communication; however, academic study of rural and urban subcultures in the U.S. has been limited. This study examines rural identity from the perspective of college students who grew up in rural areas and entered a more urban social environment. Freshmen were interviewed to investigate rural identity in young adults who had recently left the rural area, and seniors were interviewed to investigate how the rural identity changes due to the college experience. Interview data showed that rural students do share a unique identity that differs in certain ways from the identities portrayed by urban students. Evidence was also found that links these differences in rural and urban identity to differing levels of individualism and collectivism in each subculture.
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CHAPTER 1
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

America comprises areas that are extremely urban and areas that are extremely rural, with towns and cities of every size in between. One’s sense of identity is developed, in part, by the society he or she is raised in; the setting one is raised in gives him or her not only a sense of who he or she really is, but also how to behave and communicate in different social situations. Because urban and rural societies are different in many ways (population, population density, types of lifestyles, ratio of human infrastructure to natural environment, etc.), the sense of identity held by people from each type of environment may be very different, as well. Identity is a communicative process, and one’s sense of identity is exhibited in every communicative interaction in which that person participates (Hecht, 1993). If rural and urban patrons hold different senses of identity, it is therefore possible that they may communicate differently in certain ways and/or in certain situations. These potential rural-urban differences in identity and communication behavior are what I intend to study in my thesis, focusing on the perspective of the rural college student.

Statement of Problem

The possibility of differences in identity and/or interpersonal communication styles between rural and urban patrons in America has hardly been examined at all in academic literature. Most academic work regarding rural and urban communication differences seems to be in the area of telecommunications technology, not interpersonal communication or identity enactment. However, potential differences in those areas may be very visible to rural patrons who enter an urban area and interact with urban patrons, and likewise to urban patrons who enter
more rural areas and interact with rural patrons. For young adults who grew up in a rural or agricultural environment, leaving the area to attend college may be the first time they have the chance to really get to know people from urban environments, and this experience may make them start to think differently about their own identities.

My desire to conduct research in this area began building several years ago when I myself came to college from a very rural environment and began to make friends from the urban areas of Kansas City and St. Louis. Before coming to college, I had not had the chance to develop interpersonal relationships with people from urban areas. I noticed significant differences in the way these urban friends behaved in some situations compared to the way I or my rural friends from home would behave. As I have made more friends from both environments and as I have learned more about the field of communication, I now understand that the differences I perceived between my rural and urban friends may be due to the significant differences between these two types of social environments (rural and urban) and the different senses of identity that come from being raised in each respective environment. After years of observing the communication behavior of my rural and urban friends, I can see why my urban friends used to think I was standoffish, simple-minded and quiet, and why my rural friends and I thought our urban counterparts were outspoken, arrogant and even sometimes rude. This is why I want to conduct this research, because without more academic research on rural and urban identity and corresponding differences in communication behavior, a wide gap in intercultural understanding will continue to exist between rural and urban patrons in America.

It is my suspicion that differences in identity and communication behavior between rural and urban patrons may be related to differences in Hofstede’s (1984) cultural dimensions of
individualism-collectivism. Hofstede and many other scholars refer to the American culture as extremely individualistic, but they also acknowledge that not everyone within a culture portrays the same cultural characteristics or orientations (Morizumi, 2011; Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi & Yoon, 1994). While a very limited number of researchers have investigated differences in cultural orientation in American subcultures, they have indeed found that people of rural areas do show more collectivistic tendencies than people of urban areas (Tighe, 2007; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). In fact, Tighe found that the people of rural Appalachia are not only more collectivistic than urban patrons, they are also more collectivistic than individualistic, breaking with the general American norm of individualism. Tighe’s findings have important implications for the field of intercultural communication, because they contradict the traditional viewpoint that all Americans are highly individualistic.

**Statement of Purpose**

The few researchers who have found differences in cultural orientation between rural and urban subcultures inspired me to conduct research in this area and study differences in identity and communication behavior of rural and urban patrons in Missouri. The state of Missouri encompasses many rural places but also has the urban areas of Kansas City and St. Louis, as well as the somewhat smaller urban areas of Columbia, Springfield and Joplin. People from both types of environment converge at the state’s public universities, creating a mixed social environment of both rural and urban patrons that is perfect to conduct this research. I wish to focus on the rural college student identity and the challenges this identity faces in the mixed rural-urban college environment because I feel the rural subculture has not yet been segregated and studied in such a way in communication literature.
I decided to conduct a study similar to Orbe’s (2004) study of first-generation college student identities and Schultz’s (2004) study of first-generation, rural college students from agricultural backgrounds. Orbe applied Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity to first-generation college students, asking such students how central a role the ‘first-generation college’ status played in their senses of identity. His methodology and application of the Communication Theory of Identity will be useful in the design of my own study. Schultz’s study laid significant groundwork in investigating differences between rural and urban students, but that study focused more on these students’ motivations for going to college and struggles of leaving their home areas than on challenges faced in interacting with others in a more urban environment. Schultz’s study also provides some justification to my topic, emphasizing that research concerning rural – and particularly, agricultural – first-generation college students is so far lacking: “The absence of literature relating to the agricultural background status and its possible effect on students’ meaning of the first semester in college makes the exploration of this condition provocative and unique” (p. 50).

As Orbe (2004) focused on the salience of the “first-generation college student” status in his participants, I will study how large a role the “rural background” status plays in the identities of rural students, and how that status is personally expressed and enacted in social interaction. Picking up where Schultz (2004) seemingly left off, I will also investigate potential incongruence noticed by rural students attempting to communicate with more urban peers, and also the possibility of dissonance or challenges to identity that exposure to the larger sociocultural environment of the college campus may cause in rural students. I will interview both freshmen and seniors from rural backgrounds in order to investigate potential changes the rural identity
may go through during the college experience. Finally, I will also look for collectivistic traits or values in the students’ responses, to see if some aspects of rural identity and possible identity dissonance can be explained by that cultural dimension.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

My literature review will begin with an overview of the scholarly work that has been done about rural identity from a sociological standpoint. Primarily this literature is centered on a relatively new concept in sociology literature called “place identity,” or the importance of physical geographic space in shaping identity (Petrzelka, 2004). Next, I will review Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity, which theorizes how identity is enacted through personal and communal concepts, as well as in relation to and interaction with others. A part of the Communication Theory of Identity is the concept of identity gaps, which would help explain potential challenges and changes the rural identity might go through after exposure to the college environment. Finally, I will provide a section about the new ways scholars are looking at the individualism-collectivism cultural orientations, and how those orientations relate to identity and interpersonal communication, since I plan to investigate the degree of collectivistic traits and values in rural student interview responses.

Rural Identity

Most of the academic research pertaining to differences in rural and urban identity and culture lies in the field of sociology. Sociology journals provided information pertaining to rural places, people and ways of life that I needed to investigate how rural inhabitants perceive themselves and how they perceive urban inhabitants, as well as how rural identity changes for people who leave the rural area and are exposed to more urban lifestyles.
Place identity: Rural identity on the home front.

In his study of the rural-urban continuum in England, Bell (1992) found that the people of Childerley, a rural village “on London’s commuting fringe” held strong convictions that they were very different from the urban people of London in two main ways – their strong communal ties to other villagers, and their village’s closeness to nature (p. 66). The village residents Bell interviewed “were virtually unanimous in ascribing a distinctive lifestyle and pattern of social relations to country life” (p. 69). Themes of peacefulness, neighborliness, nature, small-scale infrastructure and traditional ways of life were recurrent themes in resident accounts of what their rural village was like.

Many residents also reported dislike and/or distrust toward urban people, especially urban businessmen and government officials who operated corporate farms or nature refuges in the area. The residents explained they did not trust those people because they did not like the changes they were making to the traditional farming methods in Childerley, and also because this was taking away from the “spirit of community” in the village. Bell found that residents seemed to idealize rural life, yet feel it is in decline, due to the corporate farming and also the fact that wealthy Londoners were starting to move into the community. Most of the residents also reported distinctions between themselves and “city people,” of whom they had a variety of slightly derogatory nicknames, including “bloody townies” and “yuppies” (p. 72). Bell (1992) reported that a number of residents believed that “country people are in contact with a greater reality and more objective view of life” than urban dwellers, because country people are in touch with “nature’s primal laws,” and grow up comparing man-made developments with the natural
environment (p. 78). This was used as an example of a greater “country identity” and sense of rural belonging that most residents expressed (p. 75-77).

The neighborliness and closeness to nature and traditional agriculture the Childerleyan participants reported in Bell’s (1992) study can be explained by the sociological concept of place identity. Greider and Garkovich (1994) explain the concept with the analogy of different people looking at an empty field. A real estate developer might look at the field and envision building a new housing complex. A farmer might look at the field and plan for a new wheat field, and a hunter might see himself on a deer stand in the field. “The open field is the same physical thing,” Greider and Garkovich write, “but it carries multiple symbolic meanings that emanate from the values by which people define themselves” (p. 1). The researchers theorize that all physical landscapes were created by the human conference of meaning and value to the natural environment, “reflecting our self-definitions that are grounded in [our] culture” (p. 1).

This concept is very communicative; Greider and Garkovich (1994) emphasize that “human relationships with the environment are cultural expressions used to define who we are, and who we hope to be at this place” (p. 1). The researchers use the term “social construction” – a landscape is more indicative of the humans who have assigned symbolic meaning to it than of the natural environment (p. 2). People and their landscapes mutually define each other; people give the land an identity while the land simultaneously gives its inhabitants an identity. And as the researchers point out, as a landscape faces changes, the identities of the people associated with that landscape will change, too, and as the identities of the people change, they change their landscapes to reflect those changes.
This concept of place identity can explain why rural and urban inhabitants may feel they have vastly different identities, because the physical landscapes and how people interact with those landscapes are vastly different between the two environments. The concept also suggests that people who come from different sorts of environments tend to view the world and interpret its meanings differently.

Petrzelka (2004) offered further insight into place identity by claiming that discourse – both interpersonal and public discussion of a physical space – largely contributes to the social construction of the meaning of that space. Petrzelka noted that political discourse led to the formation of the Appalachian Regional Commission, which helped mold Appalachian identities both within and outside the Commission’s borders. Likewise, she noted rural areas in Iowa and Kansas where ecologists have officially designated special landforms – the Loess Hills of western Iowa and the Glacial Hills of northeast Kansas – which after promotion through public discourse has helped the residents of those areas take a newfound pride in where they come from, thus molding their place identity. Petrzelka found that the special designation and promotion of these landforms not only brought economic gains to the area through tourism interests, but also brought significant ideological gains to the areas’ residents. The attention the newly promoted Loess Hills landform drew to the region made the residents take pride in the place they formerly were ashamed of, and residents even began naming the landform when asked where they were from.

Petrzelka’s (2004) notion that discourse aids in the social construction of place identity may explain why rural and urban citizens often hold stereotypical views of each other. For instance, as a rural adolescent I was familiar with many stereotypical concepts of what “city
people” were like, even though I had no personal contact with anyone who actually lived in a large city. Interpersonal discourses passed down on each side of the rural-urban divide may be a driving force behind the stereotypes of what rural people are supposedly like and what urban people are supposedly like.

**Changes in rural identity after leaving the rural environment.**

The above section reviewed studies of what shapes rural identity for people who have lived in rural areas and feel connected to their rural communities. In this section, I will review literature pertaining to how rural identity changes for young people who leave the rural area and are exposed to the outside world, often through attending college.

Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) and Schultz (2004) have completed qualitative research about how rural students adjust to leaving their home areas and experience the first year of college. These researchers focused on rural college freshmen. I will expand on their findings by not only asking how rural freshmen adjust to the mixed rural-urban college environment, but also asking seniors who grew up in a rural background whether the college experience affected their identities, and if so, how.

Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) interviewed a group of rural students during their senior year of high school and again one year after their high school graduation, to assess how their perceptions of the “outside world” and their own “self definitions” and personal aspirations had changed (p. 3-4). Sixteen of the students had gone to college, although one had dropped out before the year was over, and they had all lived in a more urban community after leaving high school.
The researchers quoted work by Haller and Virkler (1993), who claim that exposure to the larger sociocultural world is the main component determining rural adolescents’ aspirations in life, including education attainment, occupational goals and family matters. Haller and Virkler found that adolescents raised on farms with little exposure to the outside world were slightly more likely to stay in their rural areas and work rural jobs than to leave the area and work in high-level professional jobs. High-level professional jobs are usually not available in rural areas; therefore, rural youth are not exposed to a wide variety of career paths to explore for themselves, and they also might choose rural jobs for the convenience of staying in the rural area amongst family and friends. “Rural communities limit both cultural exposure and job opportunities for young adults,” Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) write. “As a result, people with higher aspirations migrate to more urban settings” (p. 4). Haller and Virkler (1993) acknowledge that urban adolescents do typically have higher educational and vocational aspirations than rural adolescents.

Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) found that all their rural participants as high school seniors expressed feelings of both desire and fear to leave the community and go to college. Some seniors expressed fairly intense fear about living amongst many strangers and leaving the life they had always known in their community. However, three seniors said they viewed college as a new “opportunity to be themselves,” because in their community, “everyone has always known everyone else,” and they felt they did not have any freedom to change their identities or images (p. 11). The researchers related the “shelteredness” of rural life to a means of “social control” over adolescents, which leads them to the desire to search for new identities outside the community (p. 11). Added to social control was the response by many students that there was a
lack of role models for them to identify with in the rural community (i.e. “No one’s done anything interesting or challenging here.” p. 11).

Although the students expressed that their community was boring and they felt socially constrained, all the students reported that it was a happy and supportive place to grow up. However, in the post-high school interviews many students reported that their more urban peers were emotionally stronger and better able to cope with uncertainty because of their greater sociocultural exposure. A clear theme in the post-high school interviews was that the shelteredness of the rural community had not prepared the rural students to know how to behave in new and unfamiliar social environments. However, most of the rural college freshmen said that living in the larger, more diverse social environment made them feel privileged for being raised in such a small and close-knit community, and gave them newfound appreciation for their “country values,” which they further defined as “politeness” and “close neighborly support” (p. 20).

Only two students said their perceptions of their rural community hadn’t changed much; the rest of the responses seemed to polarize between two extremes – identifying even more with their rural identity or “feeling that there is nothing for them in rural America anymore” (p. 21). Several participants reported feelings that they themselves had changed, and that they had become “more liberal and tolerant” (p. 22). Only about one-fourth of the participants said they would want to go back and settle in their rural community.

Some closing comments from Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) were striking:

…it does seem that for our participants the geographical setting of their childhood shaped the very structure of the psyche…Leaving the community does impact their development
significantly. However, we would guess that the things which are fundamentally important to these rural youths are different from their counterparts from an urban setting. Moreover, we hypothesize that these basic value and perceptual differences persist over time.” (p. 27)

These comments illustrate the possible intensity of rural-urban identity differences, and the need for further research to determine how long those identity perceptions may persist.

Schultz (2004) interviewed a group of first-generation college students from rural, agricultural backgrounds about their motivations for going to college and their first semester experience. The idea of moving to a larger town and a college campus produced anxiety in most of the participants. All the participants reported that their rural background had affected their transition into the college social environment, although some said it helped them cope with their new lives while others said it hindered them from assimilating into the new college culture. All participants reported “feelings of awe, and sometimes trepidation” when asked about the immensity of the life change of going to college (p. 49). Schultz noted that the students seemed to appreciate the opportunities available to them at college, and believed that their agricultural background had prepared them to work hard, use resources wisely, rely on themselves and get their tasks done on their own. Most students commented on the “lack of solitude, and desire to ‘get back out in the country’” while they were at college (p. 50). However, all participants also reported feelings of “pleasure, excitement, pride and accomplishment” for overcoming their initial fears and being successful at college (p. 50).

Schultz’s (2004) participants also reported feeling that they were different from the other students at college. Some reported feeling different from the others just in general; others
reported perceptions that their peers did not understand their clothing preferences. Some said they felt they had to work harder than other students to even make it to college in the first place, let alone try to succeed academically and socially once they got there. These reports from the rural students shows that perceptions of being different from urban students can range from simple appearances and fitting in to more important issues like being able to go to college and maintaining success there.

**Identity from a Communication Standpoint: Communication Theory of Identity**

The research presented thus far in the literature review deals with rural identity from a sociological standpoint – how identity is created and experienced in a rural person’s daily life. This section will offer insight on how identity is enacted and exhibited through interpersonal communication. Identity and communication have been closely linked by many scholars because identity is “performed” through communication, and social relationships – which are powered by interpersonal communication – help to mold identity (Jung and Hecht, 2004, p. 265). As Golden, Niles and Hecht (2002) wrote in a study of Jewish American identity, “communication shapes identity while identity shapes communication” (p. 46). Communication with family and community members as a child impacts one’s identity, which in turn impacts the context in which that person communicates and forms relationships with others, which again continues to impact his or her identity, and the cycle is continuous.

Hecht (1993) expands on that idea with the Communication Theory of Identity. The theory suggests that identity is a communicative act, expressed in all message transactions. Hecht referred to messages as “symbolic linkages between and among people that, at least in part, are enactments of identity” (p. 78). A person’s identity is exhibited in all messages projected by that
person, Hecht claims: “Not all messages are about identity, but identity is a part of all messages” (p. 79).

The theory designates four frames of identity – the personal frame, the enactment frame, the relational frame and the communal frame. These frames are interconnected and juxtaposed within each person. Within the personal frame, identity is “stored as self-cognitions, feelings about the self, and/or a spiritual sense of self-being” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). This frame can be thought of as one’s self-concept or self-image. Through social relationships, parts of one’s personal identity can also be ascribed to that person by others. One’s personal frame of identity can reveal how that person defines him- or herself, both in general terms and in particular contexts or situations.

The enactment frame focuses on how identity is enacted in social interactions, through communication. “Identity may be expressed as part of a message or may be the central feature of a message, and messages may express more than identity (e.g. task, relationship),” Hecht (1993) writes (p. 79). This frame explains Hecht’s comments that identity exists in every message, although it may not necessarily be the main focus of the message. One’s identity may be revealed through symbols, codes and semantic properties in conversations, Hecht claimed. The enactment frame is the way identity is revealed by the communication and actions of a person across different situations.

The relational frame of identity refers to the idea that identity is mutually constructed in social interactions, and emerges and is negotiated in all social relationships. “People define their own identities in terms of others, and shape their social behavior to those around them,” Hecht (1993) writes (p. 80). Jung and Hecht (2004) explain that the relational frame has four levels.
One level is when a person considers how other people view him or her, and “internalizes” those perceptions to develop aspects of his or her own identity. This identity is referred to as the “ascribed identity” because it is, in essence, determined by others (p. 266). Another level is when a person defines his or her identity based on relationships with others, both intimate relationships and occupational or professional relationships (e.g. “I am a mother,” or “I am a dentist,” or “I am a Christian.”). Another level, according to Jung and Hecht, is that “identities exist in relationship to other identities” (p. 266). In other words, people have multiple relational identities (daughter, wife, mother, teacher, etc.), and those identities interact with each other inside each person, forming the overall identity. In my research, I will study how the “rural person” identity interacts with the “college student” or “budding professional” identities, as well as with family, newfound friends and other relational identities in my participants. The fourth level of the relational frame is that particular relationships themselves can be an identity; for example, married couples, siblings or other close family members may share a strong “us” relational identity.

Identity is also exhibited in a communal frame; for instance, some aspects of identity are “held by a group of people which, in turn, bonds the group together” (Hecht, 1993, p. 80). This frame of identity – which could be considered a culture-level identity – may be highly visible in my research because it focuses on how one’s identity is shaped by his or her primary social collective. The communal frame of identity joins one’s personal identity with his or her collective identity, which contributes to overall perceptions of who one is and how one is to act in social situations. For rural college students, this frame may be very volatile; the students are likely to be carrying the communal identity statuses of their home community and also their newfound social identity at college.
Because the four frames of identity are all interconnected and layered within the self, researchers can examine individual frames or several frames at once to see how they all interact to form a person’s complex perceptions of his or her identity (Hecht, 1993). Hecht also notes that people’s identities are constantly developing as they enter new relationships or change various facets of their lives; therefore, college freshmen (and especially freshmen who are coming to campus from a vastly different social setting) can provide terrific insight into identity and how it can change. However, Hecht proposes that identities are also enduring, and can remain a part of one’s self-concept for a very long time; thus, the communal identities created in individuals from childhood can persist into adulthood and continue to contribute to those individuals’ social communication behavior. This means that rural students at UCM may still possess elements of their communal identities from the rural communities in which they were raised, while at the same time their identities will also be evolving as they participate in the social and academic experiences of college. My interviewing of both freshmen and seniors will seek to reveal elements of the communal rural identity, as well as how the personal identity changes after exposure to the college environment and the new relational identities that come with it.

Orbe (2004) applied Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity to study how one element of identity – being a first-generation college student – was experienced and enacted by such students. He found that the first-generation status varied in importance and salience among the participants; some thought about being first-generation every day, while others hardly thought of it at all. Some struggled with it, some did not. Those discrepancies were due to individual differences in the personal frame of identity. Orbe found that the first-generation college status was enacted by students differently when they were at home visiting compared to
when they were attending classes and spending time on campus. Likewise, the status held more weight in the students’ relational identities with their families and social groups at home compared to with their peer groups at college. This was because the first-generation student status meant that the students’ families and many of their social contacts at home had not gone to college, so the students were now different from their families in a major way. Participant responses revealed that the first-generation status was dramatized at home among their families, but at college the students had the choice of whether or not to disclose the status to their peer groups, so most students reported that the status did not significantly set them apart, socially, from their peer groups on campus.

Orbe’s study illustrated how identity can change as new chapters of life begin, as many of his participants reported the perception that they were changing, and that they started looking at their families and home communities differently as they went through college.

**Identity gaps.**

As a person’s identity changes with each new phase of life and each new social relationship, the person might experience discomfort or dissonance with new elements of his or her identity, due to identity gaps. Jung and Hecht (2004) developed the theoretical concept of identity gaps based on the notion that the four distinct frames of identity – which are integrated to form one’s holistic identity – “are not always consistent with each other” (p. 267). The frames can be “contradictory or exclusive to each other; however, despite the contradiction, the frames still coexist and work together as parts of identity” (p. 267). This contradiction between different frames leads to “dialectical tensions between and among them.” The researchers note that just as there may sometimes be discrepancies between different frames of identity, there may also be
times when different frames complement or enhance each other, leading to internal harmony rather than dissonance or tension. Jung and Hecht write that the addition of new elements of identity and the existence of both complementary frames and challenging identity gaps make identity dynamic and fluid.

There is potential for identity gaps between and among all four frames of identity. An example of what might be a common identity gap faced by rural college students would be a gap between the communal identity of ‘farm kid’ or ‘country person’ with the evolving personal identity of ‘future lawyer’ or some other professional role that would require the student to live in an urban area. Say a rural adolescent goes to college and begins working toward a career in marketing and advertising. As the student takes more classes, he or she starts thinking about the type of job he or she would like to have in the future. The student realizes that there are very limited opportunities for that type of job in small towns, and if he or she wants to find success, it will be necessary to live in a large urban area. If the student has a strong sense of rural identity and always expected to live in a rural area, this realization might be hard for the student to accept. The student might experience a degree of turmoil and struggle with an identity gap between his or her personal and communal frames of identity. The student might struggle with questions like “Who am I…am I going to become a ‘city person?’ Can I handle not living in the country anymore? What if I can’t leave my family on the farm, will I have to give up my career goals?”

Identity gaps typically cause some sort of internal struggle or dissonance, although they may not be as extreme as the above example. Identity gaps are “almost an inevitable result of communication and social relations,” claim Jung and Hecht (2004, p. 268). This is because two
people rarely interpret communication messages and social interactions in the exact same way, and every person brings different experiences, worldviews and social contexts to every communication event. Therefore, there are bound to be discrepancies somewhere between one’s personal frame of identity (self-concept), enacted frame (enacted communication), relational frame (individual relationships with others) and communal frame (shared identity with a certain collective). In the context of my thesis research, there may be a possibility of identity gaps between rural students’ personal frames of identity and their relational frames as they make new social contacts with people from very different backgrounds. There is also the possibility of gaps between the personal frame and the communal frame of identity as the students go through college and find their personal identity changing and no longer matching up with the communal identity of the home community as strongly as it once had. Another potential gap in this context would be if students change their behavior in order to fit in at college (enacted frame), and that behavior clashes with their self-concept (personal frame) or with the expectations of their social contacts from home (communal frame).

Jung and Hecht (2004) postulate that because identity is a communicative act, identity gaps must have communication outcomes. They posited three outcomes of successful interpersonal communication – communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and conversational appropriateness and effectiveness. The researchers found that identity gaps between participants’ personal frames and relational frames, and personal frames and enacted frames, were negatively correlated with the successful communication outcomes. The communication outcomes were dependent on the degree of identity gap – the greater the identity
gaps, the less satisfying and effective the communication was; the lesser the identity gaps, the better the communication outcomes.

The linkage of identity gaps to communication satisfaction, effectiveness and appropriateness, and feelings of being understood may have implications for this research study. If rural students experience identity gaps when they go to college, then the effectiveness of and satisfaction with their communication with their social contacts may suffer. The topic of identity gaps will be examined in this study with interview questions about whether the rural students have noticed differences in communication behavior between themselves and more urban students, and whether they have felt dissonance or challenges when adjusting to college life or getting to know their urban peers.

**Individualism, Collectivism and Identity**

As mentioned previously in this manuscript, my years of observing my rural and urban friends and my scholarship in the field of communication have led me to hypothesize that differences in identity and communication behavior between these two subcultures may be due to differences in the cultural value orientations of individualism and collectivism.

The concept that different cultures have differing levels of individualism was clearly elaborated in Hofstede’s (1984) study of more than 117,000 HERMES corporate employees around the world. Hofstede surveyed the employees and ranked many of the world’s cultures on four cultural dimensions that affect work-related values – including individualism. Hofstede defined individualism as a dimension of national culture that “describes the relationship between the individual and the collectivity which prevails in a given society” (p. 148). Individualism and collectivism were traditionally thought of as opposite poles of the dimension of individualism,
with both orientations reflecting how individuals relate and interact with their collectives. However, from the mid-1990s onward, scholars began thinking of individualism and collectivism as two separate dimensions, with elements of both simultaneously coexisting in individuals (Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, Horvath, Bresnahan & Yoon, 1996). Individualism and collectivism contain different values and norms when it comes to that individual-collective relationship, as described below.

People who strongly identify with the individualistic orientation value personal autonomy and freedoms, personal gratification of emotions and desires, and the ability to pursue one’s own goals and identities (Hofstede, 1984). Individualism is a self-orientation. Conversely, collectivism is other-oriented, and those who identify with the collectivistic orientation value ingroup harmony and stability and feel obligations to put the beliefs, desires and goals of the social group before those of the individual. The ingroup in this context is one’s primary social group, which in traditional collectivistic cultures was the large, extended family group (Hofstede, 1984). However, in modern cultures one might have several different ingroups – family, friends, coworkers, club members, fellow church members, etc. – to which he or she would feel connected and have a sense of collectivistic duty.

Hofstede (1984) found the American culture to rank very high in individualism – in fact, the absolute highest – and therefore, communication scholars began to believe that most Americans have strong individualistic values. Many Americans may identify with this self-orientation, but scholars have consistently found that some U.S. subcultures identify more with collectivism than individualism, and those subcultures were mostly rural, agricultural and relatively isolated. For example, Tighe (2007) found that residents of rural Appalachia not only
exhibited more collectivistic traits than other Americans, but they also exhibited more 
collectivistic traits than individualistic traits, thus totally breaking with the American norm of 
individualism. Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk and Gelfand (1995) found that Jewish Americans and 
Asian Americans exhibit collectivistic traits due to their roots in their ancestral cultures. The 
bottom line here is that not all Americans identify with a strong individualistic orientation, and 
that in fact some American subcultures are more collectivistic than individualistic. The 
orientation one identifies with has an effect on how one communicates and interacts with others, 
because each orientation comes with different values and ways of thinking about social conduct 
and interpersonal interaction. Therefore, if rural subcultures in the U.S. identify with more 
collectivistic values than urban subcultures, rural students who enter a more urban environment 
and interact with more urban residents for the first time might notice that they are following 
different codes of social behavior than their urban counterparts.

**Multifaceted Cultural Identity Theory.**

Some communication scholars – such as Lee, Beckert and Goodrich (2010) and 
Moriizumi (2011) – claim that the traditional constructs of individualism and collectivism are 
flawed and are too simplistic for today’s modern, globalized world. In fact, Moriizumi proposes 
a new theoretical framework for a “multifaceted cultural identity” that is “beyond the 
dichotomization of individualism-collectivism” (p. 17). “I argue that the focus of the theory 
should shift from the sole interest in national cultural differences in individualism-collectivism to 
a multi-level analysis that includes the individual, interpersonal, group, situational and macro-
cultural levels,” the researcher writes.
Moriizumi (2011) outlined six principles toward a new Multifaceted Cultural Identity Theory. First, all individuals have multiple identities because they belong to multiple social groups, and take on identities in relation to each various group. Second, individualism–collectivism influences the salience of one’s personal and social identity. Moriizumi posits that people who have collectivistic orientation should have more salient social identities than people of individualistic orientation, while individualistic people should have more salient personal identities than people of collectivistic orientation. The researcher explains that personal identity would include the “unique attributes we associate with our individuated self” (p. 20). Social identity is made up of ethnic and social class identity. If people who were raised in rural, agricultural environments are indeed more collectivistic than urban people, according to Moriizumi’s claims they would be more salient in terms of their place identity and their social class identity as ‘farm kids’ than in aspects of their individual identities. This will be hard to gauge, though, because the students’ personal identities will likely be in transition after entering college, and therefore would be less stable anyway.

Moriizumi’s (2011) third principle is that one’s individualism–collectivism orientation reveals his or her social value content. This means that “the more strongly our self-image is influenced by our larger cultural value patterns, the more we are likely to practice the norms and communication scripts” of those patterns (p. 20). Therefore, the stronger one’s collectivistic orientation, the greater extent he or she will exhibit collectivistic values in social interactions. Moriizumi’s fourth principle is that there are two types of collectivism – relational collectivism and group collectivism. The researcher argues that even highly individualistic people still feel a sense of duty and connection toward members of their ingroups. This principle posits that
collectivism is not so much a cultural dimension, but more of an aspect of social identity that is present in every human being, of every culture. Relational collectivism would refer to “orientations toward personal others or small interpersonal networks” (p. 21). Group collectivism would refer to orientations toward the cultural group or social collective. The researcher alludes to studies that have found that Americans (highly individualistic cultural orientation) and Koreans (highly collectivistic cultural orientation) possess the same degrees of collectivism – Americans simply adhere to relational collectivism while Koreans adhere to group collectivism. I think this principle opens the door for exciting research about the levels of both types of collectivism in rural and urban America.

Moriizumi’s (2011) fifth principle is that all cultures that identify with the collectivistic orientation may place differing levels of importance on different collectivistic values. As the researcher explains, “All cultures from the collectivistic [orientation] emphasize the importance of harmony, group belonging and seeking advice from others. However, the degree of importance and the way to approach these values may differ by culture” (p. 22). The sixth and final principle of the Multifaceted Cultural Identity Theory is that “competent intercultural communication emphasizes the importance of personal, situational, relational and cultural identity-based knowledge, mindfulness and skills” (p. 22). This principle embraces the frames of the Communication Theory of Identity, and claims that the foundation of intercultural communication is understanding the complex identities of people from other cultures. From a rural-urban American intercultural standpoint, this is what my research will work toward – developing an understanding of the rural American identity so it may be used to facilitate better intercultural communication with urban Americans.
Lee, Beckert and Goodrich (2010) also claim that traditional individualism-collectivism constructs are outdated and too simplistic. These researchers also acknowledge that not every culture is perfectly individualistic or perfectly collectivistic. They studied identity development among rural and urban adolescents in Taiwan, taking into account both gender and cultural orientation. The researchers surveyed more than 780 students to determine whether they identified with the individualistic, collectivistic or a “transitional” cultural orientation – individuals who are “more accurately categorized as somewhere between collectivism and individualism” (p. 883). The researchers argue, “It is hard to conceive in this era of globalization that adolescents…can be exclusively classified as either collectivistic or individualistic” (p. 883).

Not only do the researchers adhere to the concept that entire populations cannot be classified as either individualist or collectivistic solely based on nationality, but they also understand that individuals themselves tend to contain both individualistic and collectivistic values, placing them somewhere in the middle of the continuum.

Lee, Beckert and Goodrich (2010) found that a greater number of rural students in Taiwan identified with being collectivistic (37% compared to 21% who identified with individualistic orientation), and a greater number of urban students identified with being individualistic (35% individualistic and 23% collectivistic). However, 42% of both groups – rural and urban – identified with the transitional cultural orientation. The researchers speculate that globalization and media consumption have “contributed to an apparent shift in social value orientations in all regions of Taiwan” (p. 890). Taiwan, like most Asian countries, has traditionally ranked higher in collectivistic orientation than Western countries like America, but globalization seems to have caused both rural and urban Taiwanese people to converge toward
the center, toward a transitional orientation. It will be interesting to see if I get any responses in my own research about the possibility of modernization and media consumption affecting rural identity or causing a transitional cultural orientation. The researchers’ findings have huge implications in the field of intercultural communication. Future research that specifically studies how 21st century media consumption might affect cultural value orientation in both rural and urban residents in the U.S. would be very insightful and timely.

The other half of Lee, Beckert and Goodrich’s (2010) study evaluated identity formation in high school students. The researchers used an identity model that designated four identity statuses for adolescents emerging into adulthood. The status of identity “achievement” meant a person had “committed to a certain identity after personal exploration” (Lee, Beckert & Goodrich, 2010, p. 882). The “foreclosure” status meant a person had “committed to a certain identity without exploration.” The “moratorium” status meant a person had “engaged in exploration but not yet committed to a certain identity,” and the “diffusion” status meant a person had “not committed to a certain identity or engaged in exploration” (p. 882).

The findings regarding identity development and cultural orientations were surprising. Traditional literature on individualism and collectivism would hint that individualistic persons would be likely to reach an achieved identity status easily and quickly, while collectivistic persons would be more likely to stay in a foreclosed status of identity, because those persons would base their identities on the expectations of their social collective, and would not feel driven to explore oppositional identities, because the collectivistic orientation holds little value for individual fulfillment (Lee, Beckert & Goodrich, 2010). However, the researchers found that the students who identified themselves as collectivistic also showed higher percentages of the
achieved identity status than both the individualistic and the transitional students. It appears that the collectivistic students had thought about their own individual identities but had still committed to certain identities that were characteristic of the collectivistic orientation. This suggests that even after personal exploration, the collectivistic students were satisfied with collectivism and were happy to have identities that served the goals of the social collective.

Another finding that might be related to my research was the finding that the rural Vietnamese students, regardless of gender or cultural value orientation, largely reported (about 41% of rural males and 37% of rural females) a foreclosed identity status (Lee, Beckert & Goodrich, 2010). This means that the rural students were less likely to have explored their own identities, or had committed to certain identities without thinking about other alternatives. Likewise, the urban students were less likely to report a foreclosed status, but more likely to report a moratorium status, meaning the urban students had thought about their identities, but had not committed to a certain identity yet. The researchers explained that these findings are probably because urban Taiwanese adolescents are exposed to a very broad, modern sociocultural spectrum that the rural adolescents are not. Rural Taiwan still lacks modern communications infrastructure in some areas, so many rural families lack specialized television and Internet access, which results in rural youths being exposed to a much smaller sociocultural spectrum than the urban youths. Because of the lack of sociocultural exposure in American rural places reported earlier in the literature review, rural adolescents may struggle with identity achievement, too, although rural youths in America would likely be exposed to a broader sociocultural world than the Vietnamese youths because of their specialized media consumption.
Individualism, collectivism and communication.

Although the traditional constructs of individualism and collectivism seem to be undergoing a revolution (Moriizumi, 2011; Lee et al., 2010), both orientations have been widely studied and linked to different interpersonal communication behaviors on the individual level. Individualistic and collectivistic peoples have different ways of thinking about the self in relation to society, and how one should communicate and interact with others. The following is a brief overview of some of the individual-level correlates of individualism and collectivism in interpersonal communication behavior.

Based on her own comprehensive lit review of individualism-collectivism research, Moriizumi (2011) presents four components of both individualism and collectivism that are included in virtually all academic literature pertaining to these cultural dimensions. The four defining characteristics of individualistic people are independence, self-fulfillment, uniqueness and assertiveness. The four defining characteristics of collectivistic people are relatedness, harmony, seeking advice from others and group belonging. According to Moriizumi’s Multifaceted Cultural Identity Theory and Lee et al.’s (2010) claims that many people have an internal balance of individualistic and collectivistic values, one can expect that both rural and urban American college students will possess all of these values to some degree, but if rural people are in fact more collectivistic than urban people, they might exhibit the collectivistic values to a greater extent when interacting with strangers or new acquaintances, because those values would hold greater weight in their identities than the individualistic values. And the opposite might be true for urban people, if they in fact are more individualistic.
The values that correspond with individualism and collectivism can be revealed in a person’s interpersonal communication and social interaction, because those values represent an individual’s code of social behavior and dictate what is socially acceptable communication behavior in different situations and contexts.

**High vs. low context communication.**

One difference between collectivistic cultures and individualistic cultures is the degree of context the individuals use in verbal communication. Collectivism is associated with high-context communication, or communication in which most of the information is not in the explicit words, but in the unspoken context of the message (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003). Individualism is associated with low-context communication, in which nearly all of a message’s meaning is in the explicit words of the message.

Low-context messages are direct, and it is the responsibility of the speaker to get the point of the message across to the listener (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003). High-context messages are likely to be more ambiguous, and it is the responsibility of the listener to consider not only the words of the message but also the hidden context – the communicators’ relationship history, identities and hierarchical statuses, and other background information – to understand the whole meaning of the message. Okabe (1983) also found that low-context communicators (individualistic) are more likely to use **categorical words**, like “certainly,” “positively” and “absolutely” than high-context communicators (p. 70). Conversely, high-context communicators (collectivistic) are more likely to use **qualifier words**, such as “maybe,” “probably” and “perhaps.”
Gudykunst and Kim (2003) explain that people with collectivistic orientation use high-context communication because it is more supportive of social harmony than the more direct low-context communication. Collectivists are not likely to directly speak about a negative subject or explicitly argue with a member of the ingroup; instead, the use of nonverbal cues and communicative distance or silence will portray the message that there is a problem or someone is upset. Rural residents may be especially inclined to use high-context communication because, typically, they are intimately familiar with the people in their ingroups after living in relative isolation with them through childhood and adolescence. Thus, when communicating with someone from their rural ingroup, both parties would be intimately familiar with each other’s backgrounds and the history of their relationship, so they would be likely to understand how the other is feeling and what the other is thinking with minimal use of words. Therefore, if rural students are used to practicing high-context communication, they might perceive that their urban peers seem to talk a lot, or seem to say a lot of things that are obvious or that wouldn’t be necessary to elaborate in words.

Another aspect pertaining to the communication behavior of individualistic and collectivistic people is the issue of what information is public and what information is private. Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, Horvath, Bresnahan and Yoon (1996) suggest that collectivists who usually practice high-context communication do not exchange information they consider to be related to their innermost, private self except with the closest of ingroup members. Not only is this a result of privacy values, but also of the high-context practice itself – those who know the individual well would tend to be familiar with the private information just from the intimate familiarity with that person and the shared relational background with that person, so there
would be less of a need to physically talk about such private information. Individualistic or low-context people would be more comfortable sharing their private feelings or aspects of their innermost identities with other people, because they value uniqueness and self-actualization.

Therefore, if my hypothesis that rural people have more collectivistic tendencies – and therefore more high-context communication practices – is correct, rural college students would perceive that their urban peers reveal a lot of private information to new acquaintances. The rural students may even think that their urban peers share too much private information or exceed comfortable intimacy levels for the rural person in the beginning stages of the rural-urban friendship.

**Conversational constraints.**

Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, Horvath, Bresnahan and Yoon (1996) also highlight differences in conversational strategies between individualistic and collectivistic people. The researchers define conversational strategy as “the means to accomplish conversational goals while paying heed to certain conversational constraints…[which include] concern for hurting the other person’s feelings, concern for minimizing imposition on the other person, concern for avoiding negative evaluation from the other person, concern for communication clarity and concern for communication effectiveness” (p. 30). It is obvious that the first three constraints listed would be concerns of more collectivistic-oriented people, as they focus on maintaining social harmony and social acceptance. The latter two concerns would be more important for individualistic-oriented people because they support directness and attainment of personal goals.

These conversational constraints dictate conversational strategies people of each cultural orientation choose to follow (Kim et al., 1996). The constraints “tend to affect the general character of every conversation in which one engages and also an individual’s conversational
style, in general” (p. 34). The researchers acknowledge that collectivistic people feel the responsibility to be sensitive to their conversation partners and accommodate the conversation so as to not offend or impose on the other person and to maintain social harmony. Thus, if rural people are more collectivistic than urban people, they might take on those responsibilities when conversing with their urban peers. They might also notice that at times their urban peers don’t seem to care about offending or imposing on them, and instead will be more direct and assertive in their communication.

Just as other scholars recognize that individuals possess traits and values of both individualism and collectivism, Kim et al. (1996) also comment that individuals who are “bicultural” – possessing a fairly equal balance of individualistic and collectivistic traits, or successfully assimilated from one cultural orientation to the other – are likely to have an easy time adapting their communication styles to fit different conversational partners, social scenarios and communication goals (p. 35). Following my hypothesized scenario, if rural students grew up with a lot of urban friends or even consumed a lot of media portraying more urban lifestyles, they may be skilled in communicating with people from both environments and may not even notice any communication problems or identity dissonance at all when communicating with urban peers. These ‘bicultural’ rural students would probably have an easier time adjusting to the mixed rural-urban social environment of a college campus than rural students who remained isolated from urban contacts before coming to college.

*Face negotiation.*

Kim, Wilson, Anastasiou, Aleman, Oetzel and Lee (2009) continue the theme of Kim et al.’s (1996) conversational constraints with their study regarding facework. The modern
The construct of face and how it comes into play in interpersonal communication largely comes from Face Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). According to the theory, face “represents an individual’s claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction” (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 600). One’s face is similar to one’s self-esteem, involving feelings of self worth and having a positive social reputation. Face, like other aspects of identity, comes into play in all social interactions.

Facework is the process one takes to protect or maintain face or repair damages to one’s own face or the face of others. Face may be threatened or become damaged in “emotionally vulnerable [communication] situations,” such as conflict situations, embarrassing situations or in situations of negotiation or requesting favors (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 72). The theory specifies between self-face, which is an individual’s perceptions of his or her own face, and other-face, which is the perceived face of a communication partner. Ting-Toomey also coined the term mutual-face, which is the relational face between two or more communication partners that emerges in social interaction.

The Face Negotiation Theory posits that people with an individualistic orientation value the defense and maintenance of self-face more than people with a collectivistic orientation do, and in contrast collectivistic people emphasize the protection and defense of mutual-face and other-face in social interaction (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This makes sense, considering what has been presented about collectivistic cultures caring more about group harmony and being more other-oriented than individualistic cultures. Emphasizing the self-face typically leads to dominating or competing styles of conflict or negotiation, and therefore individualistic people are likely to be more dominating or competitive in social conflict (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey,
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2003). Emphasizing the other-face leads to avoiding or obliging conflict styles, so collectivistic people are more likely to avoid confrontation and “give in” in social conflict.

People who strongly identify with the individualistic orientation and people who strongly identify with the collectivistic orientation place differing levels of importance on perceived face threats, or perceived potential for damage to one’s own face or another’s face in a communication interaction (Kim et al., 2009). Kim et al. (2009) found that the greater one’s collectivistic orientation, the more he or she worries about potential face threats to the self or to others. People who strongly identified with the individualistic orientation provided more reasoning and persisted more in hypothetical request situations (imagining a situation in which you have to ask for a favor or request, and imagining a situation in which you have to confront someone about an unfulfilled obligation) than people who identified as stronger in collectivistic values did. Further, collectivistic people worried more about perceived face threats when thinking about Kim et al.’s (1996) conversational constraints. “The degree of one’s perceived importance of task versus relation-oriented constraints might systematically affect one’s perceived face threats in the pursuit of influence goals,” Kim et al. (2009) writes (p. 337).

Collectivistic individuals take care to not impose on another person, not hurt another person’s feelings and not behave in a way that would draw negative evaluation from others, not only because they value social harmony but also because they place a high degree of importance on maintaining a positive face for themselves and others. Collectivistic people may be more sensitive to face and potential face threats because they typically engage in high-context communication, and therefore they constantly think about not only what their communication
partners verbally *say*, but also what they nonverbally *imply* in communication episodes, which doubles the chance of potential face threats (Kim et al., 2009).

These are just a few examples of individual-level communication behaviors correlated with the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Although the constructs of individualism and collectivism are very complex and also seemingly being revolutionized in communication research (Moriiizumi, 2011; Lee, Beckert & Goodrich, 2010), I will look for these traditional individual-level communication correlates and other collectivistic traits and values in the responses of my interview participants to see if rural Missouri college students follow the pattern of being more collectivistic, as other rural subcultures are (Tighe, 2007; Singelis et al., 1995).

**Research Questions**

Based on the concepts described in the literature review, I pose five research questions to investigate in my thesis project:

RQ¹: How is rural identity verbally expressed and described by rural students?

RQ²: Do rural students perceive differences in identity or communication behavior between themselves and urban students?

RQ³: Does the college experience and exposure to ‘the outside world’ cause dissonance or challenge the identities of rural students?

RQ⁴: Do rural upperclassmen feel that the college experience has changed their rural identity?

RQ⁵: Can aspects of the rural identity, as described by rural students, be explained by the presence of collectivistic traits or values?
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Participants

I conducted interviews with nine freshmen and 10 seniors who came to college from a rural environment, in order to assess how rural students describe their identities at the early and late stages of the college experience. The college was a mid-sized state university located in west-central Missouri, about 60 miles from Kansas City.

My definition of “rural student” meant a person who was raised or spent much of his or her life on an isolated farm or in a small town of less than 1,000 people that is also located more than 25 miles from an urban area or more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. This definition is based on the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics’s designation of a remote rural place – a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urban area (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as a developed area that has at least 1,000 people per square mile) and also more than 10 miles from an “urban cluster” (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as the outer lying territories of an urban area consisting of at least 500 people per square mile) (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences).

The definition of what constituted ‘rural’ was intended to obtain students who grew up in agricultural environments that were far removed from urban environments. The reason I limited the population size of participants’ hometowns to 1,000 people is because I wanted to study people from the most extreme rural places Missouri has to offer. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) suggest that the more a person has “internalized the values of the home culture in which [he or she] are socialized,” the more of an effect the home culture has on the individual communication
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style of that person (p. 73). In other words, if the rural subculture is indeed more collectivistic than the urban subculture, the most extreme rural places are where collectivistic traits will likely be the strongest, and therefore the most visible in interview responses.

The specific criteria for the rural towns’ distance from urban areas was intended to avoid obtaining participants from what Bell (1992) calls “exurbs.” An exurb is a “region where plenty of city money is to be had, but where pastures, fields, woods or other forms of rural enterprise clearly dominate the landscape…[these are] areas where people likely argue if this is really the country” (p. 67). Exurbs are the quiet, rural places where urban and/or suburban residents move to either retire or to raise children, while commuting to the city for work and entertainment. Many of the university’s students come from exurbs located in the vicinity of Kansas City or St. Louis, and while the people who live there believe they are “in the country,” they have all the conveniences of the city close at hand, and they often maintain the same lifestyles as urban or suburban dwellers, so those students would not have been ideal for this research.

Many of the participants did come from farms, some of which were located miles from any town. Those who did not come from farms were raised in towns that met my “rural” criteria. The populations of the participants’ hometowns ranged from 30 to about 800, with about half falling into a population range of 200-400. About half of the participants’ hometowns were unincorporated. A few students grew up close to towns of about 2,000 people, but they specified that they did not actually live “in town,” and seemed to fit my research criteria otherwise, so I included them in the project. With the exception of one senior who was raised in Iowa, all the students came from small towns in Missouri. All the participants were Caucasian. All the participants were between the ages of 18 and 23.
The interviews were conducted in November 2011, so the freshmen interviewed had been on campus for about 3 months. That timeframe was ideal for this research, because it allowed the freshmen students to be in a place where they had just come from the rural environment but had been at college long enough to make friends from urban environments and begin developing their identity as college students. They would have had time to start adjusting to the college campus and the new and diverse social environment it has to offer, which could possibly have made them realize new aspects of their rural identity and also start to notice potential differences between themselves and their urban counterparts. In other words, the freshmen theoretically had one foot still planted in the rural environment, and the other planted in the college environment, so they would have vivid perceptions of each side.

The goal of the upperclassmen interviews was to assess possible dissonance or challenges to the identity that arose throughout the college experience, as well as to investigate whether the rural upperclassmen feel their identities have actually changed because of the college experience.

To find and obtain participants, I submitted a Data Request Form to the university’s Office of Student Experience and Engagement to obtain the e-mail addresses of all freshmen and all seniors enrolled. I then sent an e-mail blast to each group of students, describing the research project and the demographic criteria for interview participants, and asking students who fit the criteria to contact me if they wished to participate in the research. I had further correspondence with students who expressed interest in being interviewed to ensure they met all the criteria to participate. Interviews were arranged with students who met the criteria. Before the interview, each participant signed a consent form informing them of the risks associated with the research.
and their rights to withdraw from the project at any time. All guidelines set forth by the university’s Human Subjects Protection board were followed in the study.

The Interview

The interviews were conducted at a public place on the university campus, typically in the student union or the library, at a table or seating area that could facilitate a private conversation. As compensation for their time and information, all participants were offered a food or beverage item from campus food vendors, or $5 cash. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device checked out from a university communication laboratory.

The interviews were guided by a series of open-ended questions that were developed based on the concepts from the literature review pertaining to identity and sociological differences between rural and urban settings. The seniors had more interview questions because they were asked not only about their experience coming to college and their interactions with urban peers, but also about whether and how their identities were challenged throughout their college experience. The interview questions for each age group are listed in Appendix A and B.

Interview Coding and Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed every word and utterance from each interview in a script-like document. I then coded the transcription data using the general system suggested by McCracken (1988), which included sorting all responses, looking for relationships and contradictions, identifying themes and hierarchically sorting those themes. Using this process, I was able to analyze how rural students describe their identities at different points in the college experience, and how the rural identity is potentially challenged and even changed because of the college experience. I then looked at my findings and re-evaluated the interview
data through the lens of individualism-collectivism in meta-analysis to see if participant responses exhibited collectivistic traits and values, and to what degree.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Based on the prearranged interview questions and the natural course of discussion, five main topics emerged in the interviews with the freshmen and seniors. The five topics that were discussed in detail were (1) students’ views of their rural homes before they left for college, (2) students’ experiences coming to college as freshmen, (3) experiences interacting and making friends with people from urban environments, (4) students’ views of their own identity and how they may change/have changed during college, and (5) students’ views of the rural environment after coming to college.

View of the Rural Environment Before Coming to College

At the beginning of each interview, the participants were simply asked to describe where they grew up. Nearly all the participants, in each age group, responded in very similar ways, as summarized in the following sections.

Isolation and lack of businesses, services.

Nearly all the students – freshmen and seniors – noted a lack of businesses and services in their hometowns. The only businesses or services that were located in most of the students’ towns were gas stations and feed stores or other sorts of agri-businesses. A couple students said there was one café or fast-food restaurant in their town. Other students said that besides houses, the only other buildings in their town were churches, a post office, and a school. About half of the students said they went to a consolidated school or that there was only one high school that served multiple towns, sometimes the entire county. Eight of the nine freshmen and seven of the 10 seniors interviewed commented that in order to get groceries, visit a Walmart store or go out
to eat, they had to drive 20-35 minutes to another town. A few students pointed out that the
nearest mall was an hour or more from where they lived.

Several students spoke of a lack of infrastructure where they grew up, for example,
“There was only one highway in my town,” “We didn’t have any stoplights in my entire county,”
and “I never had fast Internet…we were fortunate enough to get low-speed DSL just recently.
And there was no point in having a cell phone until I came to college, because there was no
service anywhere in my town.”

Several of the freshmen and seniors also noted that their family lived in relative isolation,
miles from any town or residential community. Several students made the specific distinction
that they did not actually live in any town, and a couple students explained that they were located
equidistant from several towns, so while they didn’t live in a town, they used services from
multiple surrounding towns. For example, one senior commented, “My address was Centerview,
we have a Warrensburg phone number, and we were in the Chilhowee school district. So kind of
out in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of everywhere, all at once.”

Several students also reported that they were isolated from any neighbors, that they lived
out on farms and could not see any neighbors’ houses. A few said that their neighbors lived close
enough to walk to, within a mile from their own homes, but a couple students said their closest
neighbor was more than a mile away, and they had to take an all-terrain vehicle or a car to go to
the neighbor’s house.

Viewed their home as “rural.”

All of the freshmen students said they did believe that they lived in “the country” or in a
rural setting while they were growing up. Seven of the 10 seniors said they believed they grew
up in the country, and the remaining three students noted that they did not really consider where they lived to be “the country” until they came to college and saw larger towns. One senior said:

I didn’t feel like I was in the country, per say. Now I do, now I feel like that’s so country.

But I always thought, “Oh, I’m close to Penora; Penora’s a town.” They have, like, events in Penora and all the five communities go to the town, and… that was just normal. I would never have said “I live in the country,” from where I’m from.

Keeping with the idea that even the smallest of towns is still a town, many of the students – freshmen and seniors – made the distinction of whether they lived in their small town, or outside of town, on a farm. For example, one freshman said, “We live more in town, but it’s more on the side of town, so we have like, livestock around our house. We have acres behind our house, but we’re still, like, in town.” The town this student was describing is unincorporated, with a population of 275 in 2010, according to the real estate website City-Data.com. The student’s emphasis that she lived in this town shows that people who are raised in mostly rural, agricultural environments are aware that having any community around them at all constitutes a “town” compared to those who lived on farms, isolated from other houses. Because this student had livestock and farmland around her house, anyone who lived in a mid-sized town or urban area would probably have considered that place “the country,” but the student was adamant that she lived in a town.

On the other hand, a few students (two seniors and one freshman) said that they had done some travelling growing up and that they realized by seeing larger cities that their towns were very small, and different from larger towns. One senior said that she and her friends realized by watching television that they did not go to the “typical American high school,” because they saw
that their school was small and everyone knew everyone there, which was unlike what they saw on TV. The student said she considered that a positive thing, because bullying was not a problem there and the atmosphere of the school was very “encouraging and supportive.” Several students mentioned that their schools had good academic reputations.

**Relationships in the small town.**

Six of the nine freshmen and two of the seniors described how in their small communities, “everyone knows everyone, and you know everything about everyone.” The general tone of these comments were negative, and several students said that the close familiarity with everyone in the community led to “gossip” and “drama,” and how “people knew things about you and your family, sometimes before you even knew about them yourself.” Two students, one freshman and one senior, cited the gossip and the fact that everyone knows each other so well as reasons they wanted to leave their communities and live in more urban areas.

Two freshmen commented that because they went to small schools and had known everyone in their age group for their entire lives, not many people dated in high school. “If you didn’t date someone from a different school, you didn’t date,” one female freshman said. A male freshman noted that he’s found it difficult to talk to girls since he came to UCM, because he’s not used to talking to girls he hasn’t known for most of his life.

About half of the freshmen said they grew up living in close proximity to members of their extended family. Closeness to family members ranged from a student living on the same property as her grandmother, to several students who lived “just down the same road” from their grandparents, and aunts and uncles. Only two seniors mentioned growing up near extended
family. One senior reported working with parents, siblings, uncles and cousins at a family business in his hometown.

**Limited interaction with people from urban areas.**

All of the freshmen and eight of the 10 seniors said they had no friends or social contact with anyone who lived in a large city during the time they were growing up. Several students at first commented that they had friends from neighboring schools or surrounding towns, but when questioned about the size of those towns, they reported that those communities were about the same size as their own small town/school. A few students had friends from towns such as Kirksville and Sedalia (population range 17,000-21,000), but no contact with people from larger cities such as Kansas City or St. Louis. Thus, all the students had had very limited interactions with people from large urban environments before they went to college.

**Characteristics of the small town.**

Certain characteristics of small towns were described recurrently by both the freshmen and seniors, including “quiet,” “boring, nothing to do” and “very small.” A few students noted their small towns were “cliquey”; certain families were prominent in the town, while other certain families were looked down upon for some sort of social disgrace that seemingly could never be reconciled. The term “closed-minded” was used by several students; they said the people of their town were set in their ways, not open to new ideas, and newcomers in the town were not readily accepted. However, one freshman said that any newcomer – although newcomers were rare – was immediately accepted in his hometown. A few students described their towns as “very religious,” with certain religions celebrated prominently, typically either
Catholic or Methodist. Three seniors and one freshman noted that their towns were “poor,” and a couple students acknowledged that there was a drug problem in their towns.

**Experience Coming to College**

The participants’ discussions about their feelings and experiences coming to college for the first time were very similar to what Vollmer and Hedlund (1994) and Schultz (2004) found in their analyses of college freshmen who came from rural backgrounds. It seems the experience of leaving the rural environment and going to college hasn’t changed much in the 10-20 years since those previous studies were conducted – from feeling scared to leave the community yet excited to experience new and different things, to feeling uncomfortable living in a crowd of strangers for the first time.

**Feelings about leaving the small town.**

Both the freshmen and senior students reported a variety of feelings when they thought back to when they first came to college as freshmen. All of the students said they felt nervous or excited, or both when they entered the college campus. Those who reported strong feelings of excitement were likely to also report that they were not nervous to come to college (although these students were in minority, three freshmen and two seniors). The general consensus was that the students were nervous to leave the familiarity of home and the security of their parents, but they were also excited to meet new people and, as one senior put it, “begin my future.”

Other students, like one freshman put it, “…wanted to learn more about the world other than just tucks and tractors.” Several students (four freshmen and three seniors) were emphatic in commenting they were ready to leave the rural area and experience something different when
they came to college. About the same number of students mentioned feeling curious and “wowed” by the diversity of races and different lifestyles they saw on the college campus.

**Transitioning to the college campus.**

The students showed mixed responses again when they were questioned about what it was like to begin their lives on the college campus. When asked to describe their transition to college life, responses were evenly split between reporting an easy, carefree transition and a hard or rough transition. Some students used phrases like “overwhelming,” “wondering if I could do this,” and “I just didn’t know what to do at first” when they spoke of setting foot on campus as freshmen.

Discussions about which specific aspects of college life were easiest and hardest to adjust to brought another divide in responses. Two students (one freshmen and one senior) said that everything about coming to college was challenging and difficult to them, while one senior reported that everything had been easy for her when she came to college.

The most common responses from the freshmen about what had been the hardest things to adjust to at college were living in the dorms, the schoolwork (meaning difficulty of the work and also the extent of the homework) and the new responsibilities of going to class and getting homework done on one’s own, without parents forcing them to do those things. Meeting people and making friends was also a common difficulty the freshmen reported. The seniors most commonly said meeting people/making friends and missing their families were the hardest parts of coming to college. However, adjusting to the schoolwork, newfound responsibilities and meeting people/making friends were also commonly listed by both age groups as easy things to
get used to at college. Thus, the group of students had varying individual experiences when it came to what had been easy and what had been hard to adjust to when they entered campus.

About half the students reported they felt very shy when they came to college, and these students were most likely to mention meeting people and making friends as being difficult for them. A majority of students (seven freshmen and seven seniors) made comments about how “different” it was to have “so many people around” on the college campus, and how strange it was to not know anyone. One freshman commented, “It’s very different going from knowing everyone to not knowing anyone at all.” The crowdedness, lack of privacy and noisiness of living in a dorm were common challenges listed by several students. Two of the freshmen and one senior reported feeling homesick for the country when they came to college, especially for the quiet and solitude that can be enjoyed in the country.

But several students said they enjoyed meeting new people and making a new circle of friends. A few students mentioned that it was “scary” to try to meet new people, but once they did start mingling with others, it became easier and less scary to meet new people. One senior summed up the reasons he felt nervous talking to the strangers around him:

[The college town] isn’t a big city by any means, but with 10,000 new college students, the idea of having to go and meet new people… I mean that’s something that, living in the country, you don’t ever essentially have to meet new people, because everybody already knows you and you know them, or you have some sort of connection to them, somehow.

In addition to making friends and mingling with strangers, a few students (two freshmen and one senior) commented that they felt isolated because the other freshmen they met all
wanted to go out and “party” when they came to college. Those students said partying and being surrounded by strangers in large groups was very uncomfortable for them, so they did not usually go with the others, and thus felt left out or different from everyone else.

As the student’s statement in the above paragraph suggests, about a third of the students also said they found it “different” and “challenging” just living in a bigger town than they were used to. Several comments were made acknowledging that the college town was not a huge town, but it was still by far the largest town they had ever lived in before. A few students, on the other hand, commented that they felt they had moved “to the city” when they came to college; they considered the population-18,700 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) town to be a very urban area. Two seniors still referred to the college town as “the city” in their interviews.

Living in a bigger town created challenges and new experiences for some of the participants, things like learning to use a crosswalk and crossing the street properly. One freshman recalled nearly being hit by a car because she was not used to being around so much traffic, and she didn’t do a good enough job looking both ways before stepping into the street. However, others said they enjoyed living in a bigger town. There were many comments on how great it was to have entertainment options, retail stores and restaurants so close to them, either “two minutes away” by car or “within walking distance.”

A few students also noted that while the mid-sized university probably does have fairly small class sizes compared to other universities, they still found the class sizes to be much larger than they were used to in their small high schools. Three students (one freshmen and two seniors) said that answering questions in class and talking to their professors were hard for them,
because they were intimidated by the number of people in the classroom, and were used to one-on-one interactions with their teachers in high school.

**Salience of rural identity when coming to college.**

When asked about whether it was on their minds when they came to college that they were coming from a rural place or a different environment than other students were coming from, responses were fairly evenly distributed between three scenarios. Some students said they were very aware of coming from the country, and others said that where they were coming from was not on their minds at all. Another portion of students said they were not thinking about their rural roots at first when they came to college, but as they started meeting people from more urban environments, they were reminded more and more that they grew up in a different environment than other college students. One senior commented:

I don’t think it really affected me, like dawned on me, at first. But after a few weeks it just dawned on me like, “Wow, I am totally different, most of these people come from Lee’s Summit, Kansas City, St. Louis, you know, the big cities, and here I am this little country bumpkin kid that I don’t know any of this.” As time went on, it dawned on me, like, “Yeaaahhh, I’m a country kid.”

However, one freshman had the opposite experience; she said she thought a lot about coming from the country at first, but then after meeting some people from St. Louis who had never travelled and left their own community, she felt they were more sheltered than she was, and she thought less about coming from the country.

With the exception of the one student described in the previous paragraph, these three scenarios regarding the salience of the rural identity in college freshmen is very similar to Orbe’s
(2004) findings on the salience of “first-generation college student” status – some thought about the rural status all the time, while others never thought about it at all, and others only thought about it in certain situations or social contexts.

**Interacting with People from Urban Environments**

Supportive of Schultz’s (2004) findings shared in the literature review, the freshmen and seniors I interviewed did notice some differences between themselves and their urban peers as they got to know them, ranging from shallow things such as clothing styles and music preferences to deeper things such as attitudes and willingness to help others. All of the participants, with the exception of one freshman student, said they had picked up on a least a few things about their urban counterparts that were different or surprising. Most of the students – freshmen and seniors – came up with nearly the exact same list of perceived rural-urban differences, which is reviewed in the following paragraphs.

Several of the students interviewed said the perceived differences in rural-urban lifestyle and social interaction were interesting, and that they enjoyed comparing stories from their backgrounds with their urban friends. “Not only can you get culture shock from meeting new people, but you can also give it to people!” one freshman exclaimed. Another freshman said getting to know her more urban peers had been her favorite part of coming to college, because they had such different personalities and lifestyles than she was used to in the rural environment.

**Differences in clothing styles and materialism.**

A few students began the discussion about differences in clothing styles with mocking comments about seeing people on campus wear their pants so low that their underwear showed, which was never seen in the country. Besides that, six freshmen and four seniors said they
noticed that their city friends often dressed in nicer clothes and made more of an effort to “dress up and look good,” while the participants dressed more casually. As one senior commented, “They dress more for fashion, and I dress for function.”

Several other students noticed that their urban friends spent a lot more money on their wardrobes and they valued the designer labels or brand names of clothes, whereas the participants usually chose their clothes based on affordability and valued items for their functionality or durability. One freshman noted, “I hardly spend $100 on clothes in a year, and they say that’s what they would spend on just one or two items of clothing.” Several of the participants (three freshmen and two seniors) reported that this difference had led them to feel slightly intimidated, embarrassed or ashamed of their wardrobes at one point or another.

Along the same lines of urban students owning more expensive clothes, a few of the older students commented that people from the city are used to owning “fancier” things and living in more extravagant ways than they were accustomed to in the country. One senior even reported that although she had visited her city friends’ houses on the weekends, she never let any of her urban friends visit her parents’ home in the country because she was afraid they would think differently about her after seeing their older home and the older, less expensive vehicles her family members drove. Only one student used the word “materialistic” to describe this perceived facet of urban life, but several other students just commented that people from the city seemed to possess newer and more expensive things and live in nicer homes than they did.

A related difference cited by some of the participants was that they were used to trying to fix anything that broke, while their urban peers would readily throw broken items away or go out and get new items. One senior mentioned her beat-up backpack that she had carried her books in
for years. “As long as it works, I’m not going to get a new one,” she said, but commented that her city friends feel the need to get new bags every year.

In addition to having more willingness to try to fix things that are broken, a few students said people from the country are more skilled in fixing things. One senior remarked:

If someone has something in their apartment that’s broken, they call the redneck and see if the redneck can fix it! Seems like I’ve worked on more bed frames and changed more tires than anybody else! I definitely think that’s a rural mentality. It’s just the idea of being conservative. I mean, anyone who’s grown up on a farm, it wasn’t, “We’re gonna buy a new piece of equipment every time our tractor breaks down.”

A freshman offered a very similar statement:

Maybe it’s because [city people] grew up in a house where if there’s something wrong with the car, their dad calls the mechanic. If the TV’s broke, they return it to the manufacturer... Whereas, before we did any of those things, we did everything we could to fix it ourselves. I mean, maybe it’s different because in the city it’s a 3-minute drive to the nearest Jiffy Lube or whatever, and in the country we have to set 3 hours out of our day to make a trip to the city and get something fixed.

Something else that may fall into the same category of being used to more lavish lifestyles was the perception that urban students had a harder time being comfortable in the smaller college town. About one-fourth of the rural participants noted that their city friends felt bored in the college town and thought there was nothing to do there, while the rural students thought that – compared to where they came from – there was plenty to do.
Differences in eating preferences.

About half the freshmen (but only one senior) brought up the issue of differences between things they liked to eat or had eaten before that their city friends would not eat. It was not uncommon for the participants to hunt and enjoy eating deer, squirrel and even snake. One senior recalled a weekend during hunting season his freshman year of college, when he called his friends and told them he was coming back to campus and fixing them a meal of fresh venison and vegetables from his family’s garden. When he got to campus, his friends were eating a meal of fast food and told him they didn’t want to try his fresh food because it was too strange for them. Wild game aside, other students noted that their family eats fresh meat, processed from cattle or hogs raised on the farm, and that their urban friends thought that was strange. One freshman was very emphatic that she thought her city friends’ eating habits were disgusting, because she was raised on a self-sufficient farm where her family grew or raised all of their food. And she acknowledged that her city friends thought she was “weird” for not buying any frozen food or instant foods like Ramen Noodles. A couple other students mentioned that their urban friends loved eating sushi, but they didn’t even want to try it.

Another minor difference of food preferences brought up by a couple participants was that city people are more accustomed to eating out at restaurants. One senior also noted that he grew up drinking well water, so when he came to college he had to adjust to drinking city water, which tasted like chemicals in comparison.

Differences in speaking and language use.

Several freshmen and seniors had noticed differences in the way their urban friends communicated verbally, including that the urban friends used more slang terminology that was
confusing to the rural participants. A couple of students said that certain words seemed to have a different meaning or were used in different contexts by their urban friends. For example, one freshman told about a time she went to her urban roommate and said, “I’ve got a situation.” Her roommate expected that the freshman participant was pregnant, or that someone in her family had died. The participant was flabbergasted, and said her problem was just that she couldn’t pay her tuition bill on time, so she didn’t know what to do. The urban roommate said that to her, the word “situation” was used to indicate that someone had a serious or life-altering situation. A few participants also noticed subtle differences in the way their friends from the city pronounced certain words, and vice versa, although variations in pronunciation could be due more to the geographic location of one’s hometown than to rural-urban environment.

Beyond language use, about one-fourth of the freshmen and seniors said they thought their urban friends talked a lot more and a lot more loudly than they were used to hearing among their peer groups in the rural setting. “I don’t talk as much as they do,” one freshman commented. “Like, they always have something to say about something, and they’re not quiet about it.” A couple participants suggested that not only do their urban friends speak more loudly, but they actually yell a lot more than people do in the country, not out of anger, just in regular conversation. One freshman commented, “even their actions are loud,” meaning that her urban friends express themselves more boldly in both words and actions. A somewhat related concept is that two participants noticed that their city friends were more aggressive in flirting and “hitting on” people of the opposite sex.

Several participants also noticed that their urban friends did not seem to be comfortable with silence. “They can’t, like, sit in silence. They always have music playing or something…”
one freshman said. Two of the freshmen participants said they felt like they were “observers”; they often just sat back and watched their city friends interact with each other and listen to things they said, and that while they felt they were part of the group, they liked to remain on the periphery and observe everyone else.

**Differences in attitude, time use.**

Another main theme that emerged from the discussion on rural-urban interaction was about differences in attitudes and how people use their time. A few participants (two freshmen and one senior) used wording like “We just have different views about what is important.”

About one-third of each age group said it seemed like their city friends were a lot “busier,” that they “couldn’t slow down,” and they “have to be doing several things at once,” whereas the rural participants said they felt more laidback, better able to relax and that they liked to do just one thing at a time. One freshman, who worked at a retail store in the Kansas City metro area, said the city people she knew who worked or regularly shopped at the store were more hurried and rushed, and they got mad if something took longer than anticipated.

On a seemingly related note, a few of the rural participants noticed that their urban friends seemed overly dependent on their mobile devices and electronic gadgets. Two freshmen described how if they gathered with their urban friends to watch a movie, they were the only ones not texting or playing games on their phones, or surfing the Web on their laptops, during the film.

Half of the senior participants (and only one freshman) brought up a difference in politeness and courteousness. They said their urban friends did not seem as polite or courteous toward their friends or toward others in general as the participants thought was socially
appropriate. A couple of seniors said it seemed their urban peers were not as “caring” toward others and willing to help others – friends or strangers – as they were. One senior noticed her boyfriend from Kansas City was usually a lot more focused on himself than on others: “He thinks about himself a lot. And I think growing up in a small town, like, we thought about what everyone was doing…” Two freshmen used the word “immature” to describe how their city friends sometimes acted toward others. Three seniors and two freshmen also mentioned that their city friends seemed to “have big egos” and were sometimes “arrogant…they act like they know more than everyone else.” A couple participants said they noticed their urban peers would interrupt their friends and even interrupt professors with questions in the classroom, which was offensive to the rural students. The urban students seemed to also “argue the point” or “backtalk” to their professors, which a couple of the rural students were adamant they would never be comfortable doing.

**Differences in experiences / how they were raised.**

Interestingly, looking at rural-urban interaction the other way around, only half of the seniors and about one-third of the freshmen said they had ever gotten the feeling that their urban friends were looking at them like they were different. In other words, a majority of the participants shared views like this one: “I guess I never really thought about that. I always thought, like, ‘I’m normal, and you guys [urban friends] are weird.’” But the students who did feel that they had been perceived as different by their urban friends from time to time mentioned that it was usually concerning the matter of naivety. “They just thought I was sheltered, that I wasn’t exposed to all the things they were exposed to,” one senior stated. “Yeah, I think they might have just thought I was naïve…to the ways of…however they were raised.”
Differences in how the rural and urban students were raised was a major theme that emerged in the interviews, especially from the seniors. Nearly all the seniors (eight of 10) and a few of the freshmen said they were surprised to discover just how different some of their urban friends had been raised compared to the way they were raised in the country, and the different types of experiences their urban friends had had before coming to college. One of the minor differences participants mentioned in this category was the simple fact that they realized they hadn’t spent much time in urban shopping venues and they were unfamiliar with the attractions of Kansas City and St. Louis, which their urban friends liked to visit regularly.

On a more serious note, a few students said their city friends had been “wilder” than they had been in high school, partying and experimenting with alcohol and drugs. A couple participants got the impression that their parents had been stricter and/or more protective with them than their urban friends’ parents had been. They said their idea of a fun Friday night in high school was simply hanging out with friends at someone’s house, while their city friends stayed out all night and drank a lot of alcohol. Several of the freshmen and senior participants also noted specifically that they often had parties and bonfires outside, in fields, as high schoolers, and their city friends thought that was strange.

Many said they found out their city friends had been exposed to tougher neighborhoods and had seen or been in contact with more “shady people.” One senior noted:

I have a couple friends that grew up very… um…downtown Kansas City, very scary neighborhoods. I felt uncomfortable as a 21-year-old there, let alone a child being raised there all their life. I felt bad that someone would have to go through that type of lifestyle while growing up, like forcing them to grow up too fast.
Another issue that came up was the concept of “city driving.” Several rural participants said it took them awhile just to get used to the traffic in the mid-sized college town, and that they are uncomfortable driving in larger cities like Kansas City and St. Louis. On the other hand, they knew their urban friends had learned to drive in that sort of traffic, so they were a lot more comfortable with it.

The main point the discussions about rural-urban differences seemed to boil down to was the simple discovery that the rural students and their urban peers had been exposed to vastly different environments while growing up. Several students (three seniors and three freshmen) said it was surprising to them that their urban friends had not been around nature and knew so little about wildlife and agriculture. One freshman summed it up perfectly:

Just…they’re used to different stuff than I am. They’ve never messed with cattle, or rode a horse [and I do those things everyday]. So while they know how to work Red Boxes and subways and crosswalks, I know cows and horses and chickens.

Identity and Identity Challenges

Rural upbringing as part of identity.

All the participants were asked about whether they thought being raised in a rural or small-town environment had affected their identities. A vast majority (five freshmen and seven seniors) said that where they come from has played a large role in developing their identities and is a large part of who they are. Participants of both age groups had a variety of views on this topic. Some of the comments they made included: “I feel grounded, in a way, for being raised in the country”; “People are usually surprised to find out I’m from such a small town, because I don’t really act like I am. But when I think about who I am, I always think about the country side
of me”; “I feel like I am lucky that my parents instilled all those values in me when I was younger, because those values have gotten me where I am today”; and “Where I come from has affected my views of how I want to live and who I want to be when I grow up.”

A few participants said that where they come from makes up about half of their identity, because while they appreciate their rural upbringing, they never felt fully integrated in the small-town environment, and they don’t adhere to the same ideologies and ways of life that are present in that sort of environment. Only one senior said she did not consider her small-town upbringing to have an effect on the type of person she had grown to be as an adult.

**Small-town traits and values.**

A question about what kinds of traits or values the participants possess that might be linked to the environment they were raised in brought a variety of answers. The most common value listed by both age groups was that of work ethic, which had corresponding personality traits of being hard-working, disciplined and resourceful (nine seniors and four freshmen noted that category of traits/values). Other common values and traits reported by the participants were being caring and willing to do anything to help others; being courteous, friendly and respectful of others; being responsible and accountable for one’s actions; being honest with everyone and also very trusting of others; the importance of being strong; being wholesome and maintaining one’s moral code; being independent; and being unpretentious and down-to-earth. Many of the students also said that growing up in the country had given them a strong appreciation for nature, agriculture and being around animals; being close with one’s family; self-reflection and the “slower pace of life”; and an appreciation for the “little things in life.”
The rural college freshman’s view of identity.

After discussing the components of the rural identity, I asked the freshmen participants if they could see any aspects of their identities starting to change because they were in college. The response was split about 50-50, with half the freshmen saying they didn’t think their identities would be altered that much by the college experience and half of them saying that they could already see themselves changing a little bit. One freshman said she thought her identity was not changing, but that her “country” values were instead being heightened because of the exposure to all the other different personalities present on the college campus. “I see the two extremes here,” she explained. “There are some people that are very nice and very respectful, and then you see the real jerks who don’t do anything to help out other people. And seeing the extreme end of what it could be like if I let those values slip…[that would be] a problem.”

The freshmen who said they already perceived their identities to be changing a little bit said they felt they were already growing from the new experiences they were having at college, and that being in a bigger town, meeting new people and becoming more educated would probably push some aspects of their rural identities more to the background. While all the freshmen said they would never forget where they came from and that growing up in the country instilled certain values and beliefs into their lives, some students said they could see the rural ways of looking at things possibly slip away the longer they’re away from the rural environment.

The rural college senior’s view of identity.

While some freshmen did not perceive their identities would be altered due to the college experience, eight of the 10 seniors interviewed said they felt college had changed aspects of who they were and how they thought about the world. One senior made the comment:
I feel like college completely changed who I am. Like, I feel like a completely different person now than I did coming into it. And I’m not even sure if I know how to describe exactly what the difference is… Obviously there’s like, more maturity that goes with it, but also how I dress, how I act, the foods I eat, everything about me is different.

The remaining two seniors said they didn’t think their identities had changed too much and that they were “still the same person” they were when they lived in the rural environment. Like one freshmen pointed out, one senior also commented that she thought college had only heightened her rural identity traits. However, this senior was majoring in agriculture and working on a local farm, so she was probably able to keep more in touch with her rural identity, as well as have friends who were also involved in agriculture and, thus, experience less culture shock and be less exposed to urban influences at college.

The seniors who said they had changed because of the college experience said they felt they had grown tremendously because of all the new experiences they had while in college. One senior commented, “All of a sudden you realize that the world is bigger than your home county.”

A couple students said they felt a lot less shy after 4 years of being at college, and that they felt more confident and more competent, or able to handle difficult situations and step outside their comfort zones. Three students noted that their political beliefs had become a lot more liberal, as they had come to know a wider circle of people and come to see society from a different perspective. These students said they had a better understanding of viewpoints they never saw in the rural setting, and that understanding made them look at social and political issues in a sometimes completely opposite way than they would have in the rural setting. They said they were a lot more understanding and accepting of other cultures and other ways of life.
than they were when they first came to college and that they did not adhere to certain stereotypes about other cultures as much as they had before they came to college.

About half of the seniors said they had matured a lot during college. As one senior put it:

I was naïve, I didn’t really know the ways of the world… I learned that you have to be open to ideas and have the ability to change… I think I just grew up and was like, I need to do something realistic, to have a steady job and a steady career and something that could potentially support a family someday.

A couple seniors said college had “given them new directions to explore”; one senior described it as, “I don’t think of myself as where I’m from anymore. Now that I’m older I think I use more, my career to identify myself.” Although they had grown and evolved from who they were when they lived in the rural setting, several seniors said they had also come to appreciate the rural lifestyle even more after being away from it, although most of them said they did not want to go back to the rural environment (this topic will be further addressed in the following section).

This is likely related to the fact that 100% of the seniors said they felt like more urbanized individuals because of the college experience. Some of them said they felt urbanized because they had become so familiar with the cities of Kansas City and St. Louis while they were in college (going there to visit friends and significant others, to work, to shop, etc.). They said they felt comfortable in those urban environments, but they knew they would not have been so comfortable there at the beginning of the college experience. About half of the seniors said they felt more urbanized because they had become used to living in the college town, and used to the “convenience” of having stores, services and restaurants so close at hand. Still others said they
considered themselves more urbanized because they had become close with friends and/or significant others who lived in urban areas and felt unified with those people. These participants said they found themselves dressing more stylishly and buying certain things (such as designer purses) to be more like their urban friends.

When asked if becoming more urbanized was troubling to them, all the seniors said they felt good about being more urbanized. One senior said she feels slightly distressed over the fact that in order to live in an urban area as she wants, she’ll have to live far away from her family, which would be hard for her to do. A few seniors said being more urbanized and living or working in an urban area made them feel more grown up and sophisticated. One said it was “exciting” to go out to “fancy” places like the Country Club Plaza in Kansas City and have a mall and a grocery store so close at all times.

Another participant said he liked the opportunities to live a very social lifestyle in the city, but that it was even better because the city offered a degree of anonymity. He explained: “When I go up to Kansas City, I absolutely love it, because I feel like I might know people, but at the same time, I feel like I’m kind of a nobody. It’s like, ‘You don’t know my business, I like this!’” From that perspective, the city seems to offer more privacy despite the fact that there are a lot more people around, because nearly everyone’s a stranger and people don’t know everything about their neighbors as they do in the rural setting.

**Specific challenges to identity during college experience.**

More than half of the seniors (six of 10) said they had gone through at least one major identity struggle while they were in college. One senior said she experienced an internal struggle when she met a friend who turned out to be a different person than she thought he or she was,
and that person was starting to have a negative influence on her. So she struggled with certain choices and whether succumbing to that influence was really who she wanted to be. Another senior had a particularly difficult struggle when she moved to the college town and started making bad choices, primarily excessive partying, hanging out with “the wrong crowd” and using drugs. She said it was a struggle just for her to know what she was supposed to be doing at college. Her relationship with her parents suffered and she couldn’t find any subject she liked in school. She changed her major four times before she found something she could see herself doing for a living.

Two other seniors shared stories of identity struggle that involved changing their majors. They both reported that realizing their former majors were not working out and trying to find new majors was very troubling to them. One of these participants said she felt “lost” and like she didn’t have any answers to the question of where she was going in her life.

One of these seniors was also involved in a sorority and said she experienced a little bit of an identity challenge when she first joined because there were so many new people to meet and so many social functions that come with being in a sorority. She then had another identity struggle as a junior when she realized the sorority lifestyle had not been good for her and she decided to leave the organization. So, she left the sorority, moved off campus, changed her major and started seeing a new boyfriend, all at the same time. She said that was a very stressful time for her. The issue of the new major also caused an additional amount of stress because she fought with her parents when she told them she had changed to a less affluent field. They argued with her so much about it that she changed back to her original major and she struggled with this issue
for another two weeks before putting her foot down and switching back to the major she really
wanted.

Another senior said she had an identity struggle during her freshman year, mostly
because she had a boyfriend who lived back in her hometown and she missed him and her
family.

Two seniors experienced some identity struggles because of their sexual orientation. One
female senior began questioning her entire future when a man made a scene at a party, yelling
and throwing things at her when he found out she was gay. She said she became very afraid of
facing discrimination and not being accepted in the future, when she wanted to have a family.
One male senior had not “come out” about being gay before he came to college and said around
his sophomore year he had gone through a break-up and was feeling heartbroken and very alone
because he was keeping his sexual orientation a secret and wasn’t “being true to himself.” He
said he saw that everyone around him seemed to be happy, so he reflected on why his friends
were so happy and that’s when he realized it was because they weren’t trying to deny who they
were, they were just being themselves. So he started coming out to people, which was very
difficult and required a lot of self-reflection and courage. He said his grades and his social life
suffered during this period of time because he became withdrawn, skipping classes and spending
a lot of time by himself.

Three of the six seniors who had experienced an identity crisis said it took about a
semester to work through the struggle. Two seniors said it took about a year to get through, and
the senior who had fallen in with the wrong crowd when she came to college said working
though identity challenges is an ongoing process for her. However, one of the other seniors said she still has moments of doubt about certain decisions she’s made and her identity challenges.

The seniors coped with their identity struggles in a variety of ways. Primarily, they said they talked with their close friends about what they were going through. One went to see a counselor at the Counseling Center to help sort out feelings and relieve stress. Two of the seniors said that at first they didn’t deal with their identity struggles; instead, they partied more and used alcohol or drugs to take their minds off their problems. On the other hand, one senior decided to cut back on her partying and stop drinking alcohol to help her deal with her identity challenges.

Three of the seniors who had struggled with their identity noted that although the experience was difficult and troubling to them, they learned a lot from it and believed they became stronger individuals for working through the challenges. One senior said:

That semester was the best semester, learning-wise, that I’ve ever had. Because I learned so much about myself during that timeframe. Even though I got an F in one of my classes, like I’ll admit, that F does not mean a thing to me now, because I learned so much about myself.

**Family relationships and the college experience.**

Several of the participants (four seniors and three freshmen) said their relationship with their parents had changed since they started college. These students said their parents treated them more like adults and seemed to realize they were making their own decisions about their lives. Most of these students said the reason their relationship with their parents had improved was because they fought less due to the fact that they did not live under the same roof anymore. A couple of the freshmen said their parents miss them a lot since they left for college, and that
they won’t stop hugging them and asking them questions about their lives at college when they go home to visit. A majority of the seniors (seven of 10) said their families had noticed and commented that they had changed while they were in college. They said their parents seemed to notice they were becoming independent, and had made comments that they weren’t kids anymore. Three of the older students said their parents were proud of their educational achievements, and supportive of future career options. A couple of seniors said their parents had started to express sadness or fear that they were almost through with college, worried that they would move away and visit the rural home less often.

Views of the Rural Home During and After College

The interviews concluded with questions about how the participants felt about their hometowns after moving to college. The freshmen shared their views of their rural hometowns after being away from home for about 3 months. The seniors shared their views of their hometowns from their perspective of having been away from that environment for about 4 years. Surprisingly, both age groups answered in very similar ways.

Home seems different now.

Several participants (four seniors and two freshmen) said it felt “weird” to return to the rural home at their respective points in the college experience. Those students said home felt very small – even smaller than they perceived it to be when they lived there before going to college – and very boring. One freshman said her town feels “prison-like” now, because there’s no “outside involvement” there, like there are walls around the town and no one ever gets out. Another freshman used the word “dead” to describe her hometown. One senior said she feels the need to drive an hour to go shopping or visit a restaurant when she goes home, because there’s
nothing to do in the small town. “I don’t even know how I had fun there in high school,” that
senior commented. Three students said it was hard to go back to being so far-removed from
stores, restaurants and services when they went back to their hometowns. A few students said
their town seemed more quiet than they remembered, probably because they had become used to
living in a bigger town.

A couple students (one freshman and one senior) said they looked at the people of their
hometowns a little differently after they had been away at college. One said he realized that his
hometown was poorer than he perceived it to be when he was growing up. Both of these students
also said the people in their hometowns seemed especially “set in their ways” and ignorant of
things that went on outside of the rural environment. One student said people seemed even more
“dramatic” about small-town politics and gossip than they had seemed when she was in high
school. The people of the small town also seemed even more socially conservative to one student
than it had seemed while he was living there before college.

**Feelings about going home.**

For both age groups, the frequency of how often the students went back to visit their
hometowns was fairly evenly split. Some went back to visit regularly and fairly often, while
others did not go back often at all. One senior had only been back in her hometown three times in
the 4 years she’d been at college. About one-third of the seniors said they had gone back a lot
more frequently during their freshman year, but began going back less often as they got older.

The students generally had mixed feelings about going back to their hometowns. Besides
feeling bored and feeling secluded from the conveniences of restaurants and retail stores, nearly
half the participants (four freshmen and four seniors) said it felt good to go home again. Several
said it feels “comforting” to be around their families and to be back in the familiar environment in which they grew up. A few students said it was comforting to be around livestock again and one student even said the smell of the cattle made him feel comforted, because “that’s the smell of home.” Several participants also noted that going home provided a way to “unwind” and relieve stress. Two freshmen said they liked going home to “get away from the chaos” of the college environment. One senior said it’s “almost like going to another country” when he goes back to his parents’ farm because there’s no cell phone reception and he keeps his electronic gadgets shut off.

The freshmen, who typically reported visiting their hometowns more often than the senior participants, gave another mixed response about what it feels like for them to go back. A few freshmen said they really missed their college friends and the freedoms they have at college when they are at home, but when the weekend is over and it’s time for them to come back to the college town, they don’t want to leave because they don’t want to leave their families, friends/significant others and their animals/pets. One freshman who was adamant that she did not like her hometown very much and would never live there again also reported that she sometimes cries on the long drives back to the college campus on Sunday evenings, because she misses her family and boyfriend so much.

A few participants also shared the sentiment that their perception of what “home” is has changed because of college – when they came to college, they still considered their hometown to be their “home,” but after awhile, the college town became their home. A couple seniors also suggested that Kansas City was becoming what they consider “home.” However, one freshman and one senior said they actually feel like they don’t have a solid idea of “home” right now.
These students said they feel detached from their hometowns, but the college town doesn’t feel like home, either, because they are only living there temporarily. They said they feel like they have to wait until they finish school and find a steady job to establish a solid “home” again.

**Views on where they want to live in the future.**

When the question was raised about whether or not the participants would go back to live in their rural hometowns again in the future, the majority of the freshmen said they would, while the seniors had differing responses.

Five of the nine freshmen said they would go back and settle in their hometowns or on their home farms after college. Two of the freshmen were unsure if they’d go back to their hometown, and the remaining two said they would never go back. One freshman said she wanted to experience living in a “big city” as an adult, but that she might consider going back to live in her hometown when she was an older person. Two of the freshmen said if they had children, they would want to raise their kids “in the country” or a small town.

The seniors were evenly split on whether or not they’d ever go back to live in their small towns. Five of the 10 seniors said they would definitely go back to the farm or their hometown to live, while four said they would never live in a place like that again. One senior was undecided. Like the freshmen participants, a couple of seniors said they wanted to live in the city at least for awhile, but that they would be more likely to go back to their hometown or a similar town if they had kids, because they perceived the country to be a “better” and “safer” place to raise children.

The participants who said they wanted to go back to the rural environment to live in the future made remarks that they liked the comfort of always having familiar faces around and the fact that everyone knows everyone, so it’s a quiet and safe place to live. These students also
appreciated the closeness to nature and the outdoors activities that the country offers. Several of the participants said that even if they got a job in a city, they would be willing to commute a long way to work in order to live in the country. A couple of the participants expressed a desire to own land and have horses or other livestock, even if they weren’t planning to have a job in the field of agriculture.

Reasons participants gave for not ever wanting to go back to live in the rural setting was the fact that they had become more urbanized and that they liked having more people and infrastructure around them. The city offers more convenience, more entertainment, more social opportunities and more economic opportunities for these students than the rural environment can. The students who said they would not want to go back to their small hometowns were very emphatic about it. When asked about it, they said things like, “No. Never.”; “Maybe if it was the last place on earth…”; and “I just don’t think I could do it. There’s nothing for me there.” One senior realized early in the college experience that she wouldn’t be going back to live in the rural environment as an adult; she said she spent the summer after her freshman year of college at her rural home, and she hated it. She said she knew then she would never spend more than a few days at her parents’ rural home again.

The participants who said they did not want to return to the rural setting were fairly evenly divided about what type of environment they would want to live in. Some said they would like to live in a “big city,” or a mid-sized city, “at least the size of Columbia,” as one senior said. An equal number said they would not want to live in a big, dense city, but would prefer a smaller town, about the size of the college town, or a suburb outside of a city. The freshmen were more skewed toward wanting to live in smaller towns and the seniors were more skewed toward
wanting to live in bigger cities, which further supports the older students’ claims that they felt more urbanized after the college experience.

After establishing what type of environment the participants desired to live in in the future, another interview question asked whether the students thought it would be feasible to live in the desired environment given their career goals. The five freshmen who said they wanted to go back and live in their rural hometowns again acknowledged that it probably wouldn’t be feasible for them to get the job they wanted in such a small town, and that they would probably have to work in a city, at least in the beginning of their careers. However, six of the 10 seniors said they could probably get a job in their small hometowns. Three of those students did acknowledge, though, that jobs would be more accessible and higher-paying in a larger town. Only one senior said it would not be feasible for her to get a job in her field in a small town.

These results regarding the changing views of the rural home after exposure to a greater outside world greatly match up with the finding of Vollmer and Hedlund (1994), who found rural college students to polarize between the two extremes of either identifying even more with their rural identity or feeling like a totally different person after being exposed to the college environment. And as Greider and Garkovich (1994) suggest about the social construction of meaning for one’s environment, people who live in differing types of environment tend to view the world in different ways. As described in the literature review, a people and its land have a reciprocal relationship, so as one’s identity changes, he or she tends to change his or her environment to reflect those changes. Therefore, if the identities of rural college students are altered when they leave home and get a college education – which was true for a majority of the
participants – then it is natural that they would seek a change in environment or not feel comfortable in their former, rural environment by the time they finish college.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The individual discussions I had with the freshmen and the senior participants were, overall, strikingly similar. Most of the participants gave very similar descriptions of what it was like to grow up in the rural setting, what it was like to come to college and what it was like to get to know students from more urban areas, which shows that students who come to college from rural areas do share a common experience, to some degree. A few of the senior participants also commented to me at the end of their interviews that my questions related to their experiences in a chronological way, so they could tell I had experienced the same things when I went through my undergraduate education. Their comments and the fact that most of the participants gave such similar responses to my open-ended questions tell me that these students have gone through a lot of the same experiences after leaving the rural environment and making their journey through college.

The first research question I posed in this study was about how the rural identity is described by rural college students. The participants’ discussions of where they grew up, what it was like to come to college from the rural environment, how much growing up in the rural setting contributed to their overall identities, and how their identities may be affected by the college experience all helped to shed light on the rural college student identity. The results generally supported previous research done on this topic. The students reported similar perspectives as those found in Vollmer and Hedlund’s (1994) and Schultz’s (2004) analyses of rural college students, especially in their thoughts and viewpoints of the rural environment (everyone knows everyone, nothing there except fields and cows, etc.) and what it was like to
enter the college campus (feelings of nervousness and excitement, not knowing what to do at first, feeling scared to meet new people). The comments from some participants that they were uncomfortable entering a more urban environment and that they desire to return to a rural environment after college suggests that those students have a strong sense of what Greider and Garkovich (1994) and Petzelka (2004) called “place identity” – the sense that the rural environment is a part of their very identities, a part of who they are. And supportive of claims made by Jung and Hecht (2004), the rural aspects of identity remained salient to most of the senior participants years after leaving the rural environment. The students’ descriptions of the rural environment being closely tied to nature and being steeped in tradition and neighborliness also supported the findings of Bell’s (1992) study of the people of rural England.

My second research question – whether the rural students perceived urban students to have different personalities or ways of communicating than they were used to in the country – was addressed in the section about interacting with urban students. According to Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity, one’s identity is expressed in every communicative message, be it verbal or nonverbal. The rural participants shared comments that they did notice a difference in how their urban peers communicated verbally (talking a lot, using slang, speaking loudly, etc.) and also how they behaved nonverbally (being busy and rushed, more attached to their technological devices, etc.). In addition, the rural students noticed significant differences in how their urban peers interact with others, be them strangers or personal friends, illustrated by comments that people from the city were not as polite and courteous to people, less caring toward others and less willing to help others. Thus, the rural students did perceive a lot of differences between themselves and their urban peers.
In the interviews, the discussions of this topic flowed very quickly and easily, which suggested to me that the rural participants had noticed these differences and had been thinking about them for some time. I understand this from my own experience; as a college freshman, interacting with my urban peers frequently caused me to feel confused or even a little offended, although I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what made me feel this way. Thus, I spent a lot of time mulling over my interactions with my urban friends and really reflecting on what made us so different. I perceived that most of my participants had done the same.

**Identity Challenges and Changes due to the College Experience**

The third and fourth research questions – which asked whether the college experience challenges or even changes the identities of rural students – were answered in the section about identity and identity challenges. Some of the freshmen participants already sensed that their identities would change during the college journey. The majority of the seniors did say that college had changed them in some degree. A few seniors felt that they were like completely different people than they were when they entered college.

About half of the seniors also reported periods of internal dissonance when they felt like they were struggling with things that really challenged their sense of identity. These identity struggles occurred anywhere from the students’ freshman year through their junior year, and lasted anywhere from a few months to a year – and for one student, the struggle was ongoing. The specific issues that caused the identity struggles varied, but they all made the students question who they were, what they were doing in life, and who they wanted to be. These identity struggles were very troubling to the students and affected their grades and their relationships.
with others. However, the students all reported feelings that they became stronger because of the identity struggles, albeit they emerged as slightly different people than they were before.

The identity struggles described by the seniors can be explained by Jung and Hecht’s (2004) concept of identity gaps shared in the literature review. For instance, the student who was trying to hide the fact that he was gay when he first came to college seemed to experience a couple different identity gaps. At first, he was trying to ignore the fact that he was gay because that orientation was not generally accepted in his conservative rural environment. Therefore, he was first experiencing a gap between his personal frame of identity (self-concept) and his communal frame (shared group identity). Then, as he accepted his homosexuality and entered new relationships, he probably experienced gaps between his enacted frame and his relational frame, because he was in a homosexual relationship but it was in secret, so he didn’t openly enact that part of his identity to those around him. However, when he started coming out to people, he began to overcome his identity struggle, and that was because he finally aligned his personal frame of identity with his enacted and relational frames. And now that he does not live in the rural environment anymore, the student’s communal frame of identity does not seem to be based on the conservative home environment any longer. Now, it is based on the more liberal and accepting urban environment, so there is less discrepancy between the student’s personal and communal frames of identity.

The other seniors’ identity struggles seemed to be due to gaps between the personal and enacted frames (i.e., the students who discovered they did not like or were not proficient in their chosen majors); the personal, relational and enacted frames (i.e., the students who struggled with getting the ‘wrong types of friends’ and were tempted with questionable behaviors); and the
personal and relational frames (the student who struggled with being separated from her family and her boyfriend). Thus, the participants’ experiences show there is potential for gaps to arise among all frames of identity when a rural student goes to college.

**Collectivism in Rural College Students**

The fifth research question asked whether aspects of the rural identity could be explained by collectivistic traits or values. This research question was not examined by directly asking students questions about their orientations to collectivism or individualism; in fact, many of the participants were probably not familiar with these intercultural communication concepts. This research question was examined in meta-analysis of the interview data. I went through the coding sheets for all the interview transcriptions and re-analyzed student responses to other questions, looking for collectivistic qualities in their comments. I also looked at the general themes that emerged in the five main categories of results, and I did find evidence of collectivistic traits and values in the participants’ perspectives. In addition, the students made comments that suggested they themselves noticed that their urban friends seemed more individualistic than they were, and many seniors noticed their identities had changed in ways that made them feel more individualistic by the end of the college experience.

**Aware of the collectivism-individualism difference.**

While I argued in the previous paragraph that most of the participants were probably not familiar with the field of intercultural communication, many of the participants were very aware that they had different views of how to communicate and interact with others than their friends from urban environments did. So while the students may not have known what the term “collectivism” means, the comments and stories they shared showed that they understood aspects
of the collectivistic orientation and were indeed living them out. However, one senior was familiar with the concepts of individualism and collectivism, and he came out in the interview and directly stated, “I would definitely say that urbanized kids are a lot more individualistic than country kids.”

Other students shared observations about their urban peers that showed they realized how different the urban students behaved in some situations compared to how people behave in the country. A few students commented that their urban friends had “bigger egos,” and that they liked to “look for drama,” indicating a difference from the personal modesty and emphasis on group harmony that reigns in collectivistic cultures. However, a couple of participants said their city friends seem to be more open-minded, and they seem to “expect everyone to be open-minded.” While collectivistic cultures value group harmony, these cultures may not be very “open-minded,” because collectivism is based on respect for elders and authority figures, and conforming to what those figures expect. Therefore, the participants’ comments that urban students seem more open-minded suggest the urban students come from a more individualistic culture than the rural students.

Many participants brought up the fact that meeting new people and making friends when they came to college was a lot easier than they thought it would be. These comments are very indicative of a collectivistic view of interacting with strangers. For instance, one freshman said, “People’s like, perspective of each other is different than I thought. I thought it was going to be really hard to make friends, but then…it didn’t take long.” The student probably thought that making friends would be hard and take a long time because in the rural environment, she had had the same friends and known everyone in her class since she was a small child. And because it is
relatively uncommon for strangers to enter the rural environment, she probably didn’t have much experience meeting new people, so she was unsure of how easy it would be. In addition, strangers are typically received differently in the rural environment; because everyone in the rural community has known each other for years, they may establish friendships with strangers and get to know strangers at a slower pace, taking more time to seek out information about the other person in order to create a base for the friendship. After all, collectivistic cultures use high-context communication, so they rely largely on relationship history when interacting with others. Thus, collectivistic people may find it daunting to interact with strangers, with whom they have a very limited relationship history. This student and the other participants who reported it was easier to make friends than they thought it would be suggest these students come from a more collectivistic background.

One senior noted that he was brought up to “take the pressure off the other person” in a conversation, and to ask how the other person is doing or what’s going on in the other person’s life when making conversation. This, too, is very indicative of collectivism because it supports group harmony and Ting-Toomey’s concept of positive mutual face. This method of interacting with the strangers he met at college made it easy to make friends, the student reported in the interview.

However, he hinted that his ‘let’s talk about you’ approach to conversing with his new friends was not reciprocated by his urban friends, which led to conversations in which the urban friends shared a lot of information about their lives, while he did not share very much information about himself. This account also supports other participants’ comments that they often felt like “outside observers,” listening to their urban friends talk, while they were more
quiet, present in the group interaction but sort of in the background. These observations about interacting with urban students suggest that many of the participants were in fact aware that there was something different about the social codes their urban friends followed, compared to the social codes that are traditionally followed in the rural environment. The topics of interacting with strangers and making friends at college will be further addressed later in the discussion.

**Rural students’ strong orientation to others.**

As exemplified by the senior’s comments about catering conversations around the other person, a recurrent theme that emerged throughout the interviews was that the participants were very other-oriented, which is itself the basis of collectivism. Many of the students shared comments that illustrated they had strong feelings of both interest in other people and accountability to serve or support others. Several students also made statements that really illustrated a general spirit of collectivism in their rural environments. These claims are supported with interview data in the following section.

**Obligation to the parents / family unit.**

The fact that many of the participants had lived or worked in close proximity with their extended families is a major element that contributes to a collectivistic orientation. People in the most collectivistic of cultures (primarily, Asian cultures) often live in close proximity with extended family members – even under the same roof (Hofstede, 1984). Similarly, two participants noted that they had lived on the same property or in the same home as their elderly grandmothers. One senior reported that at the time she had left for college her family was caring for her grandmother, who was suffering from cancer, in their home, and that she had a very hard
time being away from home that year knowing that her family was going through such a tough
time.

Several students brought up the fact that they were raised to show strong respect for their parents and other family members and that it was understood that they needed to do what their parents and other figures of authority told them to do. This is a collectivistic concept, to serve the ingroup and do what the ingroup expects one to do. The authority of the participants’ parents was very absolute, as one freshman commented:

One thing is like, parent-wise. My parents are very strict, and just…they don’t like talking about stuff, and [city friends’] parents are so open! And I’ve met some of their parents, and I really like their parents. Their parents are so open-minded, and my parents are so close-minded.

This statement illustrates not only the authority of the parents, but also the fact that the student was used to her family unit (her ingroup) using more high-context communication, with limited verbal communication about certain things, which is also a collectivistic trait.

The student went on to say that she had witnessed her urban friends argue with their parents, and even start “screaming” at them, which was very shocking to the rural student. “I couldn’t believe it… people are so disrespectful to their parents!” she exclaimed. “I would be beaten black and blue if I did that. I’m not kidding! You don’t talk back to your parents.” The story shared by the senior student who actually stayed in a certain major because her parents wanted her to enter that profession again illustrates the authoritative status of the parents, and the participants’ sense that they need to fulfill the expectations of the ingroup.
This sentiment was repeated by most of the freshmen and the senior students. Several participants made comments that their parents had always put pressure on them to succeed, or that they had always felt the need to “work hard” to please the parents or “make them proud.” The senior who stayed in the major she didn’t like said she had not wanted to tell her parents that she had switched majors, and when she did tell them she had switched, she actually went back to the original major that she didn’t like just to make her parents happy. “I was really nervous about them being disappointed,” the student commented.

Many of the participants of both age groups said it was hard to leave their families to come to college. Several students said they were very nervous or scared to leave their families, and they missed their families terribly when they entered college. However, those feelings may not be related to a collectivistic orientation, because most students – regardless of where they are from – often miss their families when they leave for college. But a few participants uttered phrases like “I didn’t know what to do without my parents, at first,” which shows how the parents guided much of the younger generation’s activities or lifestyles in the rural setting. A couple students said they felt uncomfortable being “so far away” from their families; “in case something happened,” they couldn’t get back to their families as quickly as they’d like.

Two seniors said it is a struggle for them to balance the desire to be around their families and the feeling that they need to go out and find themselves and discover where they should go and what they should do with their lives, now that they are about to graduate from college. That sentiment illustrates the students still have collectivistic ties to the parents and that they are struggling with the idea of leaving the ingroup. Another senior had a particularly hard time separating from her family; she seemed almost guilty to start a new life away from home:
...just being able to like, let myself start a new life here, and kind of disconnect from home. Because at the beginning, I was like, “I’m going to go home every two weeks, because I miss my family.” I almost had to, like, separate my life here from my life there in order to be happy here.

*Group harmony and interacting with others.*

Family units aside, most of the students spoke of being nervous, scared or unsure of how to interact with strangers – especially people of other races besides Caucasian – when they came to college. The rural students were not used to meeting strangers because they had known almost everyone in their home communities, for basically their entire lives. This is, again, very collectivistic; the participants were unsure of how to talk to strangers because they had no shared background or relationship history to guide the interaction. As one senior explained, “It was intimidating, because I knew I didn’t know anything about their life…” That was very different than what the student was used to in the rural environment, where there is a shared relationship history to guide nearly every conversation. One freshman said everyone in his dorm hall was going out in large groups of people at the beginning of the year, even though they did not really know each other, and that “isn’t [his] style.” He said it was hard to get to know his peers here, because he hadn’t “had that class time” to get to know them, as he had had class time in school to get to know his friends in the small town.

Another student shared:

I feel like…it’s hard for me to approach them, because I don’t know what to say… But like, I find it hard to go up to people, like non-white, because I don’t know what to say to them, and I *don’t know* how they’ll perceive me.
Statements like this also show the students were thinking about how they would be perceived by the strangers they met. This is indicative of the collectivistic emphasis on having a positive self-face and mutual face in interaction with others. The students’ worries about how they would be perceived and how they should act toward strangers is also an exemplification of the importance of group harmony to them. Most of the students in both age groups mentioned respect for others, politeness and courteousness as values they obtained from being raised in the country. Some mentioned that their friends from urban areas did not seem as courteous to others as the rural students were used to. One senior said, rather emphatically, “Because that’s how I was raised, to never talk back, always say thank you, always use your manners, no matter who or what you’re speaking about, or to… saying ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’ and… just, I don’t know, just how you carry yourself.” Another senior noticed that her boyfriend from Kansas City “thinks about himself a lot,” which stood out to her because she was used to her rural collective being more other-oriented than self-oriented.

A couple participants said they perceived it as rude that their classmates interrupt the professor in class and “argue the point” or “back talk” to the professor, saying that they feel it is more appropriate to approach their professors with questions or comments one-on-one, after class. This again shows the respect the participants have for authority figures, since they felt it would be rude to interrupt the professor while he or she was teaching the class.

A couple other students said they felt that people from the country often approach talking about political issues or other controversial topics with strangers somewhat cautiously, feeling out what the other person’s stance on the topic is before beginning the discussion. This directly supports remarks shared by Kim et al. (2009) in the literature review that collectivistic people do
not want to alienate or offend their conversation partners. Collectivistic cultures value group harmony and conversing about controversial issues brings face threats and opportunities to disagree or cause rifts in the group. Two additional students, while they did not say anything directly about being sensitive to the thoughts or feelings of others in conversation, they illustrated that they were by asking me about my own stance on a certain subject before answering an interview question. For example, a freshman shared how offended he was when an animal rights activist came to campus and passed out literature criticizing animal agriculture, but before he told me about that, he asked about my own stance on animal agriculture because he didn’t want to offend me.

Likewise, during our discussion about whether she noticed differences between herself and her urban friends, a senior followed every statement that was in any way critical of people from urban environments with statements that were almost apologetic for being so critical. For example, after telling me she thought that people from the country had strong work ethics, she quickly added, “I’m not saying that people from the city don’t work hard.” This is the same student who said she noticed her boyfriend seemed to think about himself a lot, and immediately after making that statement, she said, “I’m not saying he’s a bad person, he just thinks about himself a lot.” Her adamant attempts to counteract critical statements with supportive or apologetic statements shows how attuned this senior was with maintaining group harmony; she felt uncomfortable saying anything that could be perceived as negative about someone else, despite the fact that we were alone and her responses were anonymous.

Nearly all the students mentioned that a value they got from being raised in a rural environment was caring for others and helping others. Several students, especially the seniors,
gave some reasoning for why they feel compelled to care about others and help their neighbors. Several of the students made statements like this senior’s comment:

I think growing up in a small town, like, we thought about what everyone was doing, because, like in my school, we knew everyone’s name, first and last names, we knew most of the middle names. We knew everyone from sixth grade through 12th grade, we knew everyone, we knew all about their family and all about their life, so like we actually cared about the people we were exposed to and saw everyday.

Knowing everyone in the community and also living amongst extended family members helped the participants to “know everyone’s opinions” and “learn to make friends with people, learn to get along with people you don’t necessarily like.” The students seemed to understand that the small-town culture caused them to care about what their neighbors were going through because they were so intimately familiar with them. This constant familiarity with the lives of one’s neighbors – and the resulting sense of care for them – is characteristic of collectivism.

One freshman shared an interesting insight that this type of small-town, know-everyone culture is the reason he felt so strange when he first came to the crowded college campus:

I think that, in a small town, because you know…with 15 people in my class, if I was in a room with 15 kids, every single one of them would see what happened, you know, and care about like, things that happened in my life. While here, it took me awhile to realize that there’s a lot of people here, and not all of them are paying attention to me. So it was easier to be the center of attention in a small town, and then… everybody was the center of attention, I guess, to some degree. And then you come here, and subconsciously I was thinking I was still the center of attention.
Having such an intimate familiarity with their neighbors and community is undoubtedly why the participants reported a strong value of helping others. The collectivistic value of accountability to the ingroup also comes into play here. Many students commented that it was customary for them to do indoor or outdoor chores to help keep the farm and household running smoothly, and they felt very accountable to make their contributions. One freshman explained:

Your dad says, “Hey, come help me,” or your grandma says, “Hey, come help me with the fence,” and you’re going to go help, because that’s just what you do on a farm. It puts more spending money and more grocery money, and sometimes that’s the only money you get, so…

One senior also pointed out that people in the rural environment always help others because they know that they themselves might be in the same boat one day: “And…I don’t see that as much here, I don’t see people helping each other out and really caring about other people, even though you never know when you’re going to be in that situation.” Statements like that show that the participants try to see things from others’ perspectives, which again is part of the orientation to others and the quest for group harmony that is characteristic of collectivism.

Two seniors said they feel they are better leaders in their professional organizations because of their sense of accountability to the collective. As one senior put it:

You get the understanding for how that responsibility works. The idea that any kind of action or anything you do…affects others. You get to see on more of an individual level how your actions affect others… You learn to analyze your thoughts a little more; it’s not just make a decision and go with it, you know, there’s repercussions for those actions.
The other senior is a political science major, and he said he noticed in his political organization on campus that his more urban counterparts seem to go about implementing change by just “going in and telling people what to do” to enforce their decisions, without thinking about how the people would be affected. He commented that he desires to thoroughly evaluate whether new decisions or ways of doing things would result in anyone being laid off or other negative repercussions for the people or community. In addition, he said he feels it is important for politicians to visit communities and meet with the people to ensure they understand why any changes would be implemented and why such changes would be beneficial for them. These statements about the importance of thinking about repercussions for one’s actions are very suggestive of the collectivistic orientation, where so much emphasis is placed on service to the group.

Some participants said their willingness to help others got them taken advantage of with their new group of urban friends. One senior said since she had a car she became like a taxi service to her new friends, and even though she didn’t always like driving them around, she couldn’t say no to them. Several students said they felt a strong urge to please people, and they are uncomfortable with the idea of letting people down or refusing to accommodate others, which stems from the collectivistic value of serving the group’s needs. Feeling obliged to grant favors and please people also illustrates the desire to maintain a positive face.

**Changing to greater self-orientation.**

However, several participants suggested that their orientation to always please others had faded after spending time in the college environment. One senior commented:
I think my friends would say I have more of a spine now. I’m not a pushover, and now if people ask a favor of me, I don’t just do it. Like, if I have other priorities, I don’t go out of my way, as much, for other people.

A few other seniors shared similar sentiments, that they didn’t “bend over backwards” to grant favors anymore. A couple of freshmen commented that they foresaw their urges to please others possibly diminishing now that they are in college.

Other themes emerged in the interviews with the seniors that hinted they had become more individualistic after their time in college. Several of the seniors made comments that they were coming up with their own goals, viewpoints and opinions for their future and leaving the viewpoints and opinions of their parents and the rural community behind. As one senior described:

You start to change the way you think about a lot of those things, and question some things you’ve been taught. And I think that’s an important part of coming to college, for everyone. It’s important to figure out what you believe, and not just what you’ve been taught to believe…. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I think that…the things you’ve been taught are either reaffirmed or they’re thrown out. And you believe something different because you are you, as an individual, and not just a product of your community.

That comment was very telling that the student had had a revelation in college that the ways and ideas of the rural environment were not absolute, and that he was able to form his own perspective and decide for himself what he believes. The fact that he even made comments like
that suggests that the rural community is very ‘set in its ways,’ which is a result of collectivistic behavior such as group conformity and serving group or authority expectations.

The discussions about seniors’ identity challenges revealed similar perspectives from other students. The senior who actually stayed in a major that she didn’t like just to please her parents is one example. She reported that when she first changed her major she was scared to tell her parents about it because she didn’t want them to disapprove of her new major, and when she did tell them, their angry response actually made her change back to the original major, which she was not happy with. That is a clear exemplification of the collectivistic value of serving the collective’s expectations and goals. However, after another few weeks, the student was able to put her own desires ahead of her parents’ desires and switch back to the new major. She expressed in the interview that her ability to put her parents’ opinions aside and do what she wanted to do was “life-changing.”

Likewise, the senior who struggled with the idea of coming out about his sexual orientation during his sophomore year of college stated in his interview that the reason that was so hard for him was because he was raised in such a homogenous small town. Homosexuality was not very accepted in his hometown, and so to serve the expectations of the collective, he kept his sexual orientation a secret. However, after living on the college campus, he said he realized that his peers were all “true to themselves” and were able to live their lives the way they wanted to, without fear or shame. “So, just being around people who are being themselves has, like, rubbed off on me,” he explained. He said that after having that revelation, he started to be very reflective about every aspect of his life, and started to be more of his own person. He explained:
I just think being here has made me think about myself, and be true to myself more than anybody else. I’ve realized that the person who needs to matter most in my life is myself. You know, as much as I want to please my mom and dad and my family, I have to please myself in order to please them. Because they want the best for me, and even though they might not agree with what I do, they want me to be happy.

Besides reports of the participants distancing themselves from old group expectations and being able to make their own decisions after coming to college, many of the seniors also expressed that college made them more tolerant and accepting of new ideas and of lifestyles and cultures that they were not exposed to in the rural environment. Not only did that senior become more accepting of his own sexual orientation, but several others commented that they had learned so much about other races and cultures in college, and had started to discount old stereotypes that existed in the rural environment. As one senior said:

   It’s very eye-opening. And it’s hard, because you carry with you some of those prejudices that you’ve carried with you since you were this high. And you come here, and now it’s like, “That’s funny, but now I know somebody like that. So it’s really not that funny anymore.”

Several participants said that the college experience made them develop more liberal political ideologies, at least regarding certain issues. As one senior explained, “Coming from rural America, there are certain social issues that I would have been totally against, you know, five or 10 years ago. But now it’s like, ‘Everyone’s different. It’s not a big deal.’” That student said he feels like he can’t tell his family about his new political views on certain issues, because they would be so “against it.” However, he said he understands that the reason his family would
be so against those issues is because they “don’t know anything” about the communities or people in question. He said he believed that if his family had been exposed to the “melting pot” of the urban environment and the college experience, they would change some of their political ideologies, too.

Another way the participants became more individualized through the college experience is that all of the seniors and some of the freshmen reported feeling more urbanized after being in college. Many of the participants expressed plans to leave the rural area and work in larger cities after college. The simple fact that the students planned to leave their home areas, leave their family units and live in an urban area as adults shows that they are breaking the collectivistic ties to the family and home community and forging their own paths in life, which is more indicative of individualism.

Thus, my hypothesis that people from rural environments are more collectivistic than people from urban environments was supported in this research. By the comments and stories they shared in their interviews, the rural participants illustrated that they do possess a lot of collectivistic traits and values, and they noticed that their urban peers did not follow the same social codes when interacting with others.

My observations of the participants in each age group also support the notion that rural students become more individualistic throughout the college experience. I noticed striking differences between the freshman and senior participants in the interviews. The freshmen were very shy, with the exception of one or two students, but even the more outgoing freshmen seemed much more shy than the seniors I interviewed. The freshmen, overall, seemed nervous and uncomfortable to speak to me. Many of them spoke very quietly, used nervous laughter to
fill in pauses after their responses and generally answered the open-ended questions with very limited, brief responses.

The seniors, on the other hand, seemed much more relaxed. They were friendly and seemed comfortable speaking with me. They were talkative, insightful, and they readily shared deep and serious answers to my questions. The seniors seemed to have no problem pausing to think about their responses, with no nervous laughter, and gave longer and seemingly more genuine responses. Interviews with the freshmen took, on average, about 30 minutes, while most of the seniors’ interviews lasted an hour or more.

These observations provide further evidence that the rural culture is collectivistic, and that the college experience transforms rural students into more individualistic people. The fact that the seniors were less shy and not afraid to reveal private things about themselves to me shows that they are relying less on shared relationship history to communicate with strangers and that they can more easily talk about themselves and share intimate details of their lives when they are asked about such things, which is more indicative of individualism than collectivism.
The topic of identity and communication differences between rural and urban patrons is of great personal interest to me because I know firsthand the challenges of interacting with people across the rural-urban sociocultural divide. With this thesis, I found support for feelings and experiences I myself had when I entered college. Students who come from isolated, rural areas do share many common experiences and go through a lot of the same things when they enter the college campus, make friends with people from urban areas, meet people from different countries and of other races, and learn about new ideas and ways of life. There is great potential for rural students to grow and develop aspects of their personalities in college due to the exposure to vastly different people and a much broader sociocultural world that they are not exposed to in the rural environment. Therefore, many of these students feel like totally different people when they leave the college campus with their degrees. While the salience of the rural identity varied for the seniors interviewed in this project, they all portrayed personas of individuated adults that had spent time self-reflecting and growing into their own individual identities during the college experience.

A limitation of my research was that I only focused on rural participants and rural identity, so I had no data from urban college students to compare to the rural participants’ data. With this study I can only make the claim that rural college students possess collectivistic traits and values and that they feel their urban peers do not possess as many of those traits and values. I cannot assert fully that urban people are definitely less collectivistic than rural people, because I gathered no data from urban students. However, the data gathered from rural students supported
the claims and theories presented in the literature review so precisely that it suggests my hypothesis was accurate that the rural subculture is more collectivistic than the urban subculture. Future research that analyzes urban and suburban identity and cultural orientation would provide further insight into the identities and communication behaviors each environment fosters in its inhabitants.

My findings that rural college students portray a collectivistic cultural orientation is significant because it adds to the body of research about communication differences in the rural subculture of the main American cultural group, which has so far been very limited in the field of intercultural communication. My focus on students from the most rural of rural places (farms or towns of less than 1,000 people, located at least 25 miles from an urban area) also contributes to the very limited body of communication research concerning rural or agricultural populations. People from these remote and sparsely populated areas have been widely ignored in communication literature. For instance, in two separate studies (Flemming, Peng, & Thorson, 2004; Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004) of social capital in rural and urban environments, researchers used the cities of Hannibal, Mo. and Sedalia, Mo. as their ‘rural’ test subjects. According to the Census Bureau, Hannibal is a town of more than 17,000, while Sedalia has more than 21,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Meanwhile, there are numerous counties in Missouri that have entire populations of less than 17,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). I find it a massive gap in communication research that scholars use towns like Hannibal and Sedalia as rural specimens, because to the people who grew up in the many rural counties of 8,000-10,000 people, those towns would probably seem like urban areas.
It seems the academic community is completely unaware of just how rural some agricultural counties are, and there are a lot of these agricultural counties in the central United States. So, although agricultural areas are known for their sparse populations, there are so many agricultural areas across America that their populations really add up; literally hundreds of thousands of Americans live in rural areas, yet they are ignored in academia. But I feel their relative isolation and agricultural ways of life give them a unique identity and social perspective, making them worth studying in communication research.

While differences in identity and interpersonal communication between rural and urban populations has not been widely studied in academia, it is an important topic in Missouri and in many U.S. states because areas of “city” and “country” exist throughout America, and therefore there exists a common potential for people from both types of environment to interact with each other. A greater understanding of how the environments people come from affect who they are and how they communicate can help all Americans to better communicate with their neighbors across the rural-urban divide, and possibly help put to rest some of the stereotypical views that rural and urban patrons hold toward each other.
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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – FRESHMAN PARTICIPANTS

1. Tell me about where you come. Where were you raised for the majority of your life? Do you consider that place to be a rural environment?
2. Growing up, did you have friends or a lot of social contact with people who lived in more urban areas than you did?
3. How would you describe your transition to college from a rural environment? Were you nervous to leave your hometown and come to college? If so, explain.
4. What has been the most difficult part of your adjustment? The easiest part?
5. How conscious are you of being from a rural environment when thinking about the world or interacting with others?
6. Does this consciousness change when you enter a more urban environment, or when you interact with someone from a different environment than you were raised in?
7. Have you noticed differences between yourself and others from more urban environments, or have you noticed differences between how people act in Warrensburg and how people act where you come from? Please describe specific examples.
8. Do you ever get the sense that other people at college perceive you as being ‘different’?
9. How do you notice these differences between yourself and others, if there are differences? Have you ever hesitated or not wanted to talk or interact with someone because of these perceived differences?
10. How much do you consider where you come from to be a part of who you are?
11. Do see that changing now that you are in college? Would you go back to where you came from to live in the future?

12. Would you say that being raised where you were has had an effect on the type of person you have grown to be? How?
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – SENIOR PARTICIPANTS

Same questions as freshmen participants:

1. Tell me about where you come. Where were you raised for the majority of your life? Do you consider that place to be a rural environment?

2. Growing up, did you have friends or a lot of social contact with people who lived in more urban areas than you did?

3. How would you describe your transition to college from a rural environment? Were you nervous to leave your hometown and come to college? If so, explain.

4. What was the most difficult part of your adjustment? The easiest part?

5. How conscious were you of being from a rural environment when you first came to college?

6. Did this consciousness change as you interacted and made friends with people from urban environments?

7. Have you noticed differences between yourself and others from more urban environments during the course of the college experience?

8. Did you ever get the sense that other people at college perceived you as being ‘different’ because you came from a rural place?

9. How did you notice these differences between yourself and others, if there were differences? Did you ever hesitate or not want to talk or interact with someone because of these perceived differences?

10. How much do you consider where you come from to be a part of who you are?
11. Would you say that being raised where you were has had an effect on the type of person you have grown to be? How?

*New questions:*

12. Did you ever feel that you or your identity was changing or that you struggled with your self-concept while in college? If so, when did it start? How long did it last, or is it ongoing?

13. If you experienced an identity struggle, how did you deal with it? Was it troubling to you? Why do you think you were experiencing such a struggle?

14. Do you feel that college has changed (or is changing) who you are or altered your identity from when you first came to college?

15. Do you feel you are becoming or have become a more urbanized individual because of the college experience? If so, does this worry you? How have you dealt with these changes?

16. Have others noticed or commented that you have changed because of college? If so, have others portrayed a positive or negative response to the changes?

17. Career logistics aside, would you go back to where you came from to live in the future? Do you feel you would enjoy living there again? Why or why not?

18. Now, considering your education and career goals, would you say it would be feasible for you to go back and live where you came from? Why or why not?