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## “Does It Identify Me?”: The Multiple Identities of College Students from Rural Areas

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## Research Article

# “Does It Identify Me?”: The Multiple Identities of College Students from Rural Areas

Elise J. Cain  
Jenay F. E. Willis

*The understanding of identities is an important component to understanding students and their experiences in educational contexts, especially in postsecondary education. There is limited information about the identities of college students from rural areas because this student population is often neglected as a distinct group in higher education literature. This article details a study utilizing narrative inquiry to explore the identities of three college students who graduated from high schools in rural areas. The findings suggest that these students' races and ethnicities, genders and biological sexes, and sexual orientations were their salient social identities. Rurality was not a prominent identity, but their perceptions and experiences were shaped by their rural backgrounds. Rural students' places of origin and their multiple identities, therefore, should not be ignored within P-20 education.*

People from rural areas in the United States are attaining higher levels of education than in the past as evidenced by 41% of rural adults who completed at least some college in 2000 compared to 50% of rural adults who completed some college in 2015 (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2017). These gains in educational attainment, however, differ greatly by demographics within rural areas. For instance, according to the USDA (2017), “the educational attainment of racial and ethnic groups in rural America is increasing, but these groups continued to be only half as likely as Whites to have a college degree in 2015” (p. 3). The intersection of rurality with race and ethnicity, therefore, seems to play a critical role within people’s educational pathways, especially within higher education. These data support the need to investigate the educational experiences of rural people beyond national statistics to a more nuanced approach based upon various demographics and social identities.

Currently what is known about various demographics and social identities of rural students is limited, however, because there is minimal literature addressing the identities of college students from rural areas due to this student population often being overlooked and understudied as a distinct group in higher education (Byun et al., 2017; Cain et al., 2020). Since many current articles on rural college students that do exist simply report information about these students and do not consider how these students identify with their rural backgrounds and their other social identities, this study sought to fill this gap. Thus, the purpose of this article is to expand

education’s understanding of rural students by exploring rural college students perceptions of their own identities.

To investigate this aim, this article explores the research question: What perceptions do college students who graduated from rural high schools have about their identities? Such is captured within the narrative accounts of three college students. Through the students’ narratives, it was found that these students’ rural identities were not as prominent as some of their other identities, and that these students seemed to use defensive othering relating to rurality. Nevertheless, the rural backgrounds of these students also seemed to be interwoven within their experiences relating to their identities (i.e., their races and ethnicities, genders and biological sexes, and sexual orientations), indicating that students’ places of origin should not be ignored within their multiple identities. Based upon these findings, this article concludes with recommendations for future research and implications for educational practice.

## Literature Review

Rural identity is often ignored within American society which in many ways paints a picture that equates to urban identity superseding rural life (Strauser et al., 2019). When considering how rural identity is defined, much of what makes up rural life is tied to conservatism (Ashwood, 2018; Boso, 2019) and country living which creates imagery of dirt roads, tractors, and a small familial community in which everyone knows everyone by name (Leon &

Jackson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2011). Calling a place home or being from a specific geographic region in America comes with its own stereotypes. Rural identity in particular has many ties to negative connotations which in turn impacts rural students as they embark on their college careers within higher education (Goldman, 2019). Due to what are often overgeneralizations tied to rurality, rural students sometimes find it difficult to identify with a sense of place and default to other identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (Henning et al., 2019; Kazyak, 2012). These mentioned identities that rural students express have a greater connection to identities that have been historically marginalized along with the identity of being rural (Creed & Ching, 1997). Enrolling in college is where the exploration of identity or finding one's self unfolds (Patton et al., 2016), which in this case speaks directly to rural college students' making sense of rural identity. The following literature review will outline the importance of exploring rural identity for college students as well as address significant identities that form interconnections with students' rural identity.

For rural students, the exploration of identifying from the respective geographical region or a state or place (which is namely rural) has traces as early as adolescent years (Slocum, 2019). Scholars have described rural identity as complex, including both objective (i.e., places of residence and work) and subjective (i.e., social and cultural meanings) components (Cain, 2020; Creed & Ching, 1997; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019). Connections to growing up in rural spaces or having a rural identity takes on many perceptions as defined by society and the individual. This tends to be the case for rural students, in which rural students come to know and understand how they perceive themselves along with how they are perceived by others (Ketter & Buter, 2004; Liao, 2017). For instance, Liao (2017) highlighted the importance of language mattering for rural students who are exploring their identity as part of a marginalized population. Additionally, rural college students who choose institutions that are situated in urban or suburban cities might experience identity conflict as people who are torn between two worlds, being seen as too country for the city or a city person at heart who is from the country (Liao, 2017).

Rural students navigating identity exploration are often marginalized, and because of this, exist in the world as an underrepresented population. This marginalization can be rooted within their rural

backgrounds in an urbanormative society which standardizes city lifestyles (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019; Thomas et al., 2011). For instance, rural students who attend larger universities sometimes feel unprepared for the lifestyle changes within their new environments (Heinisch, 2017). Coupling rural identity with minoritized status in some ways additionally causes rural students to become further marginalized when exploring significant identities inclusive of social and cultural identities that also exist in the margins (Shucksmith, 2004). For example, understanding gender and sexualities that do not fit heteronormative standards as deemed by society causes assumptions to arise by those who fit nicely into the heteronormative, which is applicable to rural identity (Lensmire, 2017). In conjunction with heteronormativity therein lies the norm of rurality equating to whiteness (Sierk, 2017). Equating rurality to whiteness negates the diversity of rural spaces in terms of race (Tieken, 2014). To disrupt the dominant narrative of rurality equating to whiteness, it is important for White students to explore how race, class, and gender impacts their rural identity (Ketter & Buter, 2004). In this manner, this challenges rural White students to critically think about how identities rooted in privilege and oppression are both seen and understood while also challenging their dominant white privilege and the power it holds. Furthermore, consideration of the intersections of multiple identities of rural students negates the assumptions that rural students are monolithic and that rural areas lack diversity because deeper perspectives of individuals are gained.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized Jones' and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). In unpacking rural identity for college students, it is important to name that many identities are socially constructed which encompass racial identity (Cross, 1995), gender identity (O'Neil et al., 1993), and sexual identity (Cass, 1979). Each of the identities mentioned exists as a single identity; however, it is in seeing all identities of the students with whom we engage that we come to understand the nuances and complexity of their multiple identities.

The MMDI is a model "representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development" (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 408).

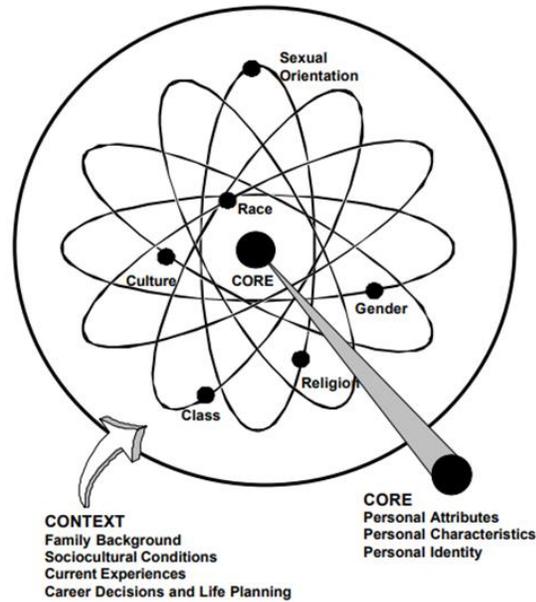


Figure 1: Jones' & McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. From "A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity," by S. R. Jones and M. K. McEwen, 2000, *Journal of College Student Development*, 41(4), p. 409. Copyright 2000 by ACPA–College Student Educators International (ACPA).

The model comprises of a core that contains personal attributes, personal characteristics, and personal identities as well as self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions (social identities), some examples including race, gender, religion, culture, sexual orientation, and social class, which surround the core (see Figure 1; Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000). The outermost layer of the model consists of contexts, which include family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences, career decisions, and life planning. These contexts influence people's self-perceptions and experiences of their identities (Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

For rural college students, exploring who they are is a part of discovering and meaning making of their rural identity as well as other identities they consider salient. Jones and Abes (2013) defined the *salience* of a particular dimension of an individual's identity as the person's "awareness of that dimension or social identity. Salience emerges out of the interaction between the individual's sense of self and the larger sociocultural context external to the individual" (p. 71). The MMDI is pertinent to the construction of rural college students' identities in that it helps them understand who they are as individuals and allows them to gain an understanding of what identities they hold. Most importantly, using

the MMDI helps students gain a sense of self and what identities they associate as core identities and salient social identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Jones & Abes, 2013). Jones and Abes (2013) described the model as a "developmental snapshot for a particular individual" (p. 55) that changes with shifting contexts and circumstances. In the study, therefore, the MMDI helped to frame an understanding of how college students from rural areas defined their multiple identities within their college contexts at the time of the investigation.

## Methods

The epistemological approach for this study was centered within both constructivist and critical perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Holding multiple epistemological perspectives at the same time uncovered new ways of understanding the identities of the rural students within both micro- and macro-levels (Duran & Jones, 2019). Based upon the epistemological approach and the research question, narrative inquiry was selected for the methodology (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodology allowed for the in-depth investigation of students' experiences and perceptions. Following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) metaphorical concept of the "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (p. 50), the dimensions of temporality,

interaction, and place were considered throughout the research process. For the dimension of temporality, the past, present, and future experiences of the rural students were highlighted. Next for the dimension of interaction, the personal and social relationships of the students' experiences were centered. Lastly, for the third dimension of place the various locations within the students' narratives were examined.

### **Setting and Participants**

The site of this study was a large, public research university in the northeastern United States. The participants of this study were purposefully sampled (Creswell, 2014) to all be full-time undergraduate students, at least 18 years of age, and students who graduated from public school districts in either rural distant or rural remote areas as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2006). Students who graduated from rural fringe schools were omitted from this study due to schools and students in this classification having different demographics compared to those in rural distant and rural remote areas (Greenough & Nelson, 2015). The students were recruited through the institution's electronic student news broadcast system and completed a brief electronic survey to ensure they met the inclusion criteria for the study. The students received \$20 gift cards for their participation.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data presented in this article was part of a larger project on rural students' college experiences and identities. The topics covered within this study included the participants' college-choice processes and college transitions as well as their identities and the relative importance of these identities. Ten students participated in this study. The narratives of three of the 10 students are represented in-depth within this article due to a specific form of purposeful sampling, called intensity sampling (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), "an intensity sample consists of information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest" (p. 234). Thus, the narratives of these three participants are highlighted due to the richness of their narratives relating specifically to their identity perceptions. For the seven students whose narratives are not included in-depth in this article, their identity dimensions played less pronounced roles within their narrative accounts. Rather these students' stories centered more on their college-choice processes or college transition

experiences that were the alternative topics of the larger study.

During the research process, each of the study participants selected their own pseudonyms and participated in two semi-structured interviews with the first author. The interviews ranged from one to two hours in length and were scheduled one to three weeks apart from each other. Following narrative inquiry protocol, annals or outlined histories of each of the participants' experiences were created in between interviews and reviewed with the participants (Clandinin, 2013). Interview transcripts, interview notes, and author memos were used to create a narrative account of each participant while being mindful of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These tentative narrative accounts were next reviewed by an outside examiner. The edited narratives were then shared and negotiated with the participants via email and in-person meetings, working toward a sense of co-composition of the writing (Clandinin, 2013). These steps also added trustworthiness by having an outside examiner and by attuning to the voice and signature of both the participants and the researcher during the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Researcher Positionality**

The positionality of the researcher cannot be separated from the research process or the knowledge gained through research (Clandinin 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The first author identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender female. She graduated from a high school in New York State categorized as rural remote (NCES, 2006). She worked with college students as a student affairs professional for almost a decade before becoming a higher education scholar and faculty member. The second author identifies as a rural Black woman. She spent much of her adolescence along with a number of years of her adult life in the rural South. As a rural scholar-practitioner much of her scholarship engages her lived experiences within the rural South. These lenses inevitably influenced the authors' perspectives on this topic, their assessment about the importance of this work, and informed this research.

### **Findings: Narrative Accounts**

In the following sections, excerpts from the narrative accounts of three students, Alejandra,

Simon, and Jay, will be shared. The excerpts of the narratives will be presented in this section and then analyzed afterwards in the discussion section. This formatting intentionally presents the narrative accounts of the students as negotiated with them to best represent who they were and who they were becoming (Clandinin, 2013). Furthermore, the narratives are separated from the analysis within the theoretical framework to avoid formalist representation of students as mere examples of the theory, but to forefront the students as “embodiments of lived stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). Note, the data include participants’ direct quotes, which may use bias-laden terms.

### **Alejandra’s Narrative**

Alejandra was a neuroscience major in her third and final year at the university. She identified as being Latina, female, and bisexual. Alejandra spent the first six years of her life in a city located less than an hour from New York City. She then lived in an area that is defined by NCES (2006) as a large suburb located about three hours from the university. She lived in this area with her mother, stepfather, and two half-siblings. Although her house was in a suburban area, she attended middle and high school in a neighboring school district located in a rural distant area. Both of Alejandra’s biological parents earned at least their bachelor’s degrees.

### **Salient Identities**

Alejandra described herself saying, “I go by she, her pronouns. Gender, I’d identify as female. I automatically define myself as Latina, and I’d tell people that I’m half Puerto Rican, half Honduran, but no one ever remembers Honduran.” When asked about the importance of these identities, she stated, “I would say personally the Latina is probably the most important to me.” Alejandra saw being female as being her next important identity, noting “I think that’s just overall male/female issues. Also, there’s just a lot about being a female that I realize especially throughout college, there’s a difference between men and girls. Especially when it comes to sexual assault stuff.”

In addition, Alejandra also added her sexuality as an identifying characteristic.

Then I identify as bi, but I’ve never had a conversation with my parents about that at all. ... I think the issue is just having to start that conversation in the first place, and I don’t want to

do it, particularly because my stepdad will make jokes about it.

On the other hand, Alejandra shared:

All my friends know. That’s also because their opinion, so to speak, doesn’t matter. Not that it doesn’t matter as much, but it doesn’t have so much of a direct impact as the fact that I still have to live at home with my parents during breaks and after I graduate.

### **Rurality**

One attribute Alejandra did not use to describe herself was being from a rural area although she graduated high school in a rural distant setting. She believed that her exposure to a rural area influenced her preferences, like not wanting to live in a city, but did not influence her personality. Although as she discussed this, Alejandra realized it was complex for her to describe.

I feel like I don’t particularly follow the rule, like the type of girl that you would find in a rural area. ... I feel like when you’re looking for someone from a rural area, you have a picture in your mind who you would expect that person to be. I picture someone from a rural area to be the quintessential rednecks ... not someone who’s very put together. ... I guess, *I’m* part of that population.

She then explained:

Well, I’m okay with identifying as I’m from [my hometown] versus I’m from a rural area. I don’t mind telling people I’m from [my hometown]. I don’t mind telling people about my high school. I do mind talking about the rednecks. I’m very ashamed of the rednecks.

Alejandra first mentioned the people she calls rednecks when she was describing how she felt safe in her hometown. She noted quickly, however, that the rednecks made her feel unsafe and she tried to avoid them.

The rednecks are the people that just love their John Deere, and love their tractors, and just love the fact that they just chew dip all day in the middle of the high school. ... It was basically just like ... they always had to have their steel toed boots on. They always had to have their camo on. They always had to have their hats on, and bend the rim, like, a lot. Have like a fishhook in there sometimes. They talk a little weird. Some of them lived on farms. Some of them didn’t. Some of them just adopted that

style. ... There was never a person of color that was a redneck. All the rednecks were White. Alejandra said she was still being impacted by comments made to her by these people she called rednecks during the 2016 Presidential election:

I think it was because that's when I started to realize that that was a big divide in between me and the rednecks. ... I felt more of a divide between the people who and I were like that especially during that time because everyone decided to show their true colors. ... Obviously, there were the people that were like me and were really smart in the classes, liberal and we all would be like, "fuck the rednecks," but at the same time, there was that huge divide, and there would be my friends that jokingly tell me to go back home. Don't get me wrong. They were my friends. I know it was a joke. ... Some people would hear my friends saying it to me, and I knew it was jokingly coming from my friends, but then I would hear it from someone else that would actually be a little bit serious.

Alejandra further detailed other ways the 2016 Presidential election greatly influenced her.

I really feel like I have to vote because of the outcome of the 2016 election. I feel like that's a big deal especially for me, especially because I'm a Latina. ... It made me feel because I was Latina that my voice mattered less because they were just like, "Well, obviously you're not gonna like Trump. Obviously."

She then added, "Obviously, I'm going to be a little bit more lax in immigration than before because if my grandparents didn't make that decision, I would not be here today."

In addition to her own personal feelings, Alejandra saw that the election and the division in opinions was affecting her relationship with her family members as well.

It's affecting me a lot with my family. My mom is Hispanic. ... My stepdad's family, White as shit. Horribly, ... my grandfather on my stepdad's side will say things like, "I don't see color." Then he'll say something about how he grew up in [his hometown] and how there's more Black people and isn't that such a shame? You have that type of family divide going on.

Intertwined within Alejandra's narratives from her rural high school and her experiences at college were her social identities. These identities impacted her daily life at both locations. Alejandra distanced herself from labeling where she was from as rural due

to stereotypes she felt were associated with rural people. She realized as she was talking, however, she was also from this rural place and she interacted with others whose values also aligned with hers in this rural place. In the end, though, she was more comfortable being associated with her town and her high school than the label of rural.

### **Simon's Narrative**

At the time of interviews, Simon was a first-year, first-semester student at the university. He did not have a declared major, but he was thinking about majoring in chemistry and theater. Simon identified as being a biracial, gay, and cisgender male. He graduated high school from a school district in a rural distant area that was located about an hour drive from the university. Simon was an only child and grew up in a home with both of his biological parents, neither of whom attended college.

### ***Rurality***

Simon grew up in "a very small town." Simon had mixed feelings regarding his hometown and its people.

Growing up it was great because it was small and so I was friends with a lot of people. It was safe that nothing ever happened or at least you didn't hear about things. The people were friendly but as I grew up and started to see more things and lose a lot of my innocence, I started to realize how trashy some of the people were. A lot of racism, a lot of like homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny, all that terrible stuff that you hear from the country and it's just really, I don't want anything to do with that. ... As much as I had me and my friends who did believe in positive things and had not-racist morals and everything. It's just too much for me there and I knew everybody. And as cool as that was to be able to say hey to anybody on the street, it sucked that I definitely felt if I had a secret you couldn't tell anyone because everyone would find out.

Simon's view of his hometown began to change as he grew older.

I remember in middle school was when I was the most stressed about everything because that's when I did start to figure out stuff with my sexuality and coming out and everything. It was just hard because I did know that there were a lot of bad people that wouldn't be supportive and

that would have problems with that and that I could be in an unsafe situation. But I was lucky that I had a lot of people that supported me and a lot of supportive friends and everything.

When Simon was considering where to attend college, he knew he did not want to commute from home.

I felt like at home I couldn't grow anymore and I wasn't going anywhere, I wasn't doing anything, but I felt I was stagnant. ... It was definitely always something that I knew that I had to do because, like I said before, I had grown out of my town. I didn't feel I really belonged there anymore, and I don't feel I belong there anymore.

### *Salient Identities*

As a first-year student, Simon was “struggling a lot” with defining himself, which he attributed to social media.

On social media there's this trend of people saying, “Liking Arianna Grande isn't a personality. Liking this and that isn't a personality. Being mean isn't a personality.” And that just got me thinking, I don't even know what personality stuff is anymore.

He continued to explain, “I don't really know who I am and it's so hard for me to say who I am because that's not what everybody else thinks. Everybody views every single person differently.”

Simon also realized he often used his interests or activities he was involved in to describe who he was.

Specially within the past couple of weeks, I've been struggling with my identity and who I am. I feel like I use what I'm doing as my identity a lot, and what's going on in my life. I don't think that that's useful or true even, because it's like what I'm doing isn't who I am.

Even though Simon was struggling to define his personal attributes, two social identities that were key to his narrative were his race and ethnicity. Simon stated, “I'm biracial, because I'm half Filipino and half Caucasian.”

Relating to these identities, Simon shared a few occasions when he experienced racism.

I think I was lucky because I didn't experience it super often. But when I did, it was a really cruel reminder that it still existed. ... One of the biggest examples was I was walking through the hall one time. I was in sixth grade. There was an older kid, like an eighth grader or something, I was completely alone in the hallway. They were

way ahead of me, and they turned around and looked at me. They must have been talking about it or something before, but then this one kid turned around and said, “Like that kid. He needs to go back to his own country.”

In addition to his race and ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation were also important social identities to Simon.

I'm a cisgender male. I've never really struggled with my gender identity, which I'm lucky to say, I guess. I'm confident in my type of masculinity. Maybe I'm not the same type of masculine as everyone else, but I'm comfortable with who I am with my gender identity and everything. I'm gay. ... It's not who I am as a person, but it also has a lot of impact on who I am as a person.

Simon recalled having conversations with a few close friends in high school about their gender identities.

I had friends in high school who weren't openly trans but had told me and we had talked about it. I remember finding on YouTube... [I would] stumble upon trans people on there that would share their stories and talk about what was going on with them. It was always interesting to me to see that stuff. For a while, seeing it and hearing them talk often made me think, is this me? Am I like this? And everything. I think after a while I just realized I know I like the body I've been given.

Unlike his gender identity, there were some difficult times relating to Simon's sexual identity.

The only time that I really struggled with it was when I first came out in the first two years of high school. Then I slowly started to realize ... when I figured out that it doesn't matter what other people think about me, I think that was when I was just like, “I'm fine. I can deal with everyone.”

He did acknowledge his experiences to be more complicated than this, however.

I used to be more ... internalized homophobia is something that I used to struggle with a lot more because it was easy to just be like, “Well I'm not one of those gay people that's super gay. I'm only...” I don't know how to describe it.

During the time of this study, Simon was struggling as a first-semester college student to define his personal attributes, yet he could easily describe his race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Simon did not name rurality as a salient identity, but believed his rural hometown impacted his experiences as a biracial, gay male.

## Jay's Narrative

Jay identified as heterosexual, White, and male. He graduated from a rural distant high school located about a half hour drive from the university. Jay grew up with both of his biological parents and two older sisters. Both of Jay's parents attended college when he was a child. Jay transferred to the university after attending a private college for one year. At the time of the interviews, Jay was a senior biology student who lived with his family of origin and commuted from home to the university.

## Rurality

Jay was born and lived in Philadelphia until he was about eight years old when his family moved to a rural town. When asked what he remembered from when he was new to his rural town and school, he said he was:

very aware that it was pretty White, because ... third grade was my first year in [school] and I don't remember anyone not White in that classroom, so that sticks out for sure. Hunting, that definitely came on early too because all my neighbors hunted. So, I was definitely like, "Oh this is weird, we don't hunt." I'm vegetarian too.

Although Jay had not lived in Philadelphia for more than 10 years at the time of the interviews, when talking about how he described where he was from to his college friends, Jay answered, "Usually I tell people I'm from Philadelphia."

It's like you know what Philadelphia is, right? Everyone knows Philadelphia, well most people. So Philadelphia, it fits in. It's like, oh Philadelphia, okay. But then sometimes I do say, yeah, I'm local or I'm a commuter. Sometimes I do say, oh I'm from [state], rural [state]. It depends on the situation I do it in and who I'm talking to.

He admitted that generally as his relationships progressed with people, he was more honest and detailed about where he was from. Jay shared, "I told some people about this [study], that I'm from a rural area, and they were surprised. They were like, 'Oh wow, that's cool.' Usually that doesn't happen. Usually people aren't like, 'Oh wow, cool. Rural.'" When asked why this reaction surprised him, he said, "I don't think the reaction I normally get is a negative. I just think it's not overwhelmingly positive. It's more just, oh okay. Usually neutral."

Jay had some uneasiness regarding the information he had shared during the interview process because he shared, "I feel like I have to live up to something." When asked to further explain these feelings he answered, "well I guess, to be honest, at first I thought I was a fraud because I am from Philly."

Jay did not seem to identify with being from a rural area. For instance, during the second interview when asked how he saw being from a rural area relating to who he was, his response was, "Does it identify me? I don't know. It's part of my past, but is that part of me? I don't know." He continued to explain:

I think some people do jump to conclusions. And I don't know what conclusions you jump to about rural [state]. And I don't know, seeing me and how I dress, if you are gonna jump to those conclusions, I don't think I dress like someone if you are from a rural place. I don't dress in camo, you know? I don't know.

Jay also perceived differences between his values and those of many of the other people from his hometown.

This actually happened last week, we were talking about the election and how swastikas got drawn on the school. And I was talking to someone who's from [New York City] ... and they were like, "Oh it's crazy. It's weird how people are around here. They're very conservative." And I was like, "Oh yeah I know, I'm actually local." And then they had a look in their eyes. They were like, "What does that mean, you're a local?" So, then I felt the need to say, "I'm very liberal."

This separation Jay felt between himself and his rural area was something he noticed since he first moved to the area at eight years old. As a commuter student, Jay still lived in his rural hometown and experiences the rural environment daily. Reflecting on living in a rural area he commented:

I've definitely been thinking about my upbringing more I think, so that's part of it. Where I grew up, just driving around. I go home. I still live in that place. ... So, I'm still a very rural person. I don't know how rural I feel.

## Salient Identities

Rather than being known for his rural background, there were other identities more salient to Jay. When asked about the identities he used to

define himself, Jay stated, "I want to be known as someone who is kind of jovial. I'm not outgoing, but I like to make people happy. ... I also like being, not counterculture, but a little alternative I guess."

When pushed to talk not only in terms of personality characteristics but social identities, Jay was visibly uneasy talking about being a heterosexual, White man.

It's weird to be in this society where White, straight man is on top, that you feel like it's a disservice to yourself. I don't feel like that's part of my identity. I don't really bring that up. It's just something that I have in the back of my head sometimes.

When asked to further explain this he remarked, "I think it's more just I don't want to be reduced to a straight, White male." Jay continued by saying:

This might just be me, but ... because at least, in the counterculture that I want to be in, there's nothing enviably about anyone. Those [White, heterosexual men] are the villains usually. ... You don't want to see yourself as the villain.

He was quick, though, to follow this part of the conversation up with, "That might just sound like me whining about being privileged." So, he was asked to explain that further.

That's something I don't want to be either. Yeah, it's a hard thing to navigate, so it's something I don't really bring up. I guess the identity thing brings it up. So, I have privilege. That's a thing. It kind of seems like I was whining about it.

Although Jay liked being around more diversity at the university, he was less confident in sharing his social identities versus his personal attributes. When he did talk about his social identities, he referenced his experiences as a heterosexual, White man. He acknowledged the privileges he was given by these identities, but he also was still struggling with taking ownership of these privileges. Because Jay was not born in his rural area and because he saw himself differently than the other people in his area, he did not believe being from a rural area defined him but it did influence the types of experiences he had.

## Discussion

To meet the intended purpose of this article in expanding knowledge of rural students by exploring the identity perceptions of college students who graduated from schools in rural areas, the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) will be used as a framework to analyze the narratives of

these students. In the following sections, the students' personal and social identities will be described first. Next, the influence of the students' rural contexts and the influence of systems of oppression will be discussed. This section concludes with limitations and implications for future research as well as recommendations for education professionals.

## Personal and Social Identities

When directly asked about their identities and how they currently defined themselves, Alejandra, Simon, and Jay began by discussing their personal characteristics or personalities. This is consistent with Jones and Abes (2013) findings that at the center of college students' definitions of self are their personal attributes, and that social identities vary in importance to students based on their prominence in students' lives. In addition to these characteristics, the students shared narratives about their races, ethnicities, genders, biological sexes, and sexual orientations. These characteristics became interwoven with each other as well as intertwined within the students' experiences. An intersectional perspective regarding the importance of identity suggests that in addition to the importance individuals assign to specific identities, sociohistorical contexts also determine importance of identity characteristics (Jones & Abes, 2013). Thus, when structures of privilege and oppression are considered, the status of the students' identities align with previous literature with the oppressed identities more closely aligning with the personal definitions of self for these students (Jones & Abes, 2013; Patton et al., 2016). The exception to this was the prominence of Simon's gender because he did discuss the importance of his cisgender male identity which is a dominant social identity. Simon's awareness of his cisgender identity, however, may have been heightened because of his membership in the LGBTQ community and the fact that he had friends who were trans, making his cisgender identity more salient in his context. Jay's concentration on himself only as an individual and not as a member of collective groups, moreover, is directly tied to the legacy of white privilege (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Tatum, 1997). Some scholars posit that White people are trained to value individualism and to see themselves as only individuals and not a part of racialized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; DiAngelo, 2011).

## Contextual Influences and Systems of Oppression

Beyond the impact these social identities had on these three students as individuals, their narratives highlighted several ways contextual influences and systems of oppression affected their lives and their understandings of themselves which is consistent with the outermost layer of the MMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000). For instance, Alejandra and Simon both experienced racial microaggressions, racism, and homophobia; like when both students shared they were told by others that they should “go home” due to their races and ethnicities. Alejandra also did not feel comfortable sharing her bisexuality with her parents due to jokes she had heard her stepfather tell and Simon had trouble at school when he began to divulge his sexual orientation with others. Race, gender, and sexual orientation are social identities already considered within the social identity development of college students (Jones & Abes, 2013; Patton et al., 2016). One area not given as much attention, however, is the influence of students’ places of origin on their perceptions of their identities.

Although these students did not use their rural background as one of their primary attributes to describe themselves, a critical analysis provides insights to why this may be the case. First, all three students shared that there were times when they felt as though they did not belong in their rural areas due to the intersection of their minoritized identities within their rural contexts. For instance, Alejandra sometimes felt marginalized due to being Latina in a predominantly White area. Simon, likewise, shared his race and ethnicity as well as his sexual orientation occasionally distanced him from the predominately White, heteronormative culture in his hometown. Additionally, Jay felt his liberal viewpoints contrasted the more conservative perspectives of some of the people in his rural town. Most (about 80%) of the rural population in the United States identifies as being White (United States Department of Agriculture, 2018) (although there are uneven distributions of races and ethnicities throughout the country [Showalter et al., 2019]), meaning Alejandra and Simon were outnumbered relating to their races and ethnicities in their predominantly White, rural environments. Current popular discourse about rural areas in the United States, furthermore, does connect rurality and conservatism (Ashwood, 2018; Boso, 2019). These students, therefore, were speaking about their experiences relating to their salient social identities with respect to the meaning of those social identities within their rural settings. Often a sense of

difference sparks identity salience (Jones & Abes, 2013); so, for these students their salient identities resulted from them feeling that these dimensions differed from the people around them in their rural areas.

Besides the connection between their social identities and their rural backgrounds, the three students’ narratives seemed to specifically separate themselves from the identifying label of rural. Alejandra, for example, was comfortable telling people about her hometown and her school, just not classifying them as rural. All three students, however, answered a research study call with the headline “rural students can earn \$20 in gift cards,” graduated from high schools defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) as rural, and spent varying proportions of their lives in these rural environments. One reason both Alejandra and Jay may have felt disconnected from their rural identities was because both students were not born in the rural areas they graduated high school from. Altman and Low (1992) described the complexity of the concept of place attachment, noting for instance, how biological, environmental, psychological, and sociocultural processes are all associated with the formation and maintenance of place attachment. Furthermore, Fulkerson and Thomas (2019) described how the objective and subjective components of rural identity can fully align, can have partial interactions, or can have “a high level of incongruence” (p. 99). These students’ experiences of a lack of a sense of belonging, therefore, likely attributed to some of their disassociation with their rural areas. Furthermore, since the students’ salient identities did not match their assumed norms for rural areas, they likely further disassociated themselves with the label of being rural.

Applying a more critical perspective to the students’ distancing themselves from the categorization of rural means additionally examining the sociohistorical status of rural areas in America. Rural areas are often defined as culturally inferior, sub-par, and backwards within television, movies, books, and school curriculum (Creed & Ching, 1997; Reynolds, 2017; Theobald & Wood, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011). All three of the students were aware of common rural stereotypes and even used some of these stereotypes during their interviews. For example, Jay said, “I think some people do jump to conclusions. And I don’t know what conclusions you jump to about rural [state]” and then one sentence later utilized a rural stereotype of wearing

camouflage. In addition, the students did not see themselves as representative examples of the types of people in rural areas due to buying into stereotypes of who a typical rural person should be. For instance, Alejandra directly said, "I feel like when you're looking for someone from a rural area, you have a picture in your mind who you would expect that person to be. I picture someone from a rural area to be the quintessential rednecks." All three of the students additionally discussed other people in their rural areas who shared the same values and characteristics as them. For instance, Simon commented, "I had me and my friends who did believe in positive things and had not-racist morals and everything." Since these people were counter to the typical rural stereotypes, however, the students did not consider themselves (or these other people) when they described the people in their home areas.

The examples of the ways Alejandra, Simon, and Jay stereotyped and distanced themselves from their rural backgrounds may additionally indicate that these students were defensively othering their rural identity. Schwalbe et al. (2000) defined defensive othering as "identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group" (p. 425). People who utilize defensive othering accept the devalued identity of the subordinate group imposed by the dominant group. It is a reaction to the power dynamics of the groups and ultimately reinforces the superiority of the dominant group (Schwalbe et al., 2000). These students, therefore, might have been defensively othering their rural identities because of the perception that rural areas are second-rate to urban areas. Their othering of their rural identities, however, only further perpetuates urbanormative thinking, where urban settings are viewed as culturally superior to rural settings (Thomas et al., 2011).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

With every research project, there are limitations to this study. Due to the nature of narrative inquiry and intensity sampling, a limitation of this article is that it only shares the narratives of three individuals from one higher education institution. The three students in this article each possessed their own set of identities. Other identities were not discussed in this article due to them not being prominent to these students. By selecting different students or by specifically asking the students about these other

identity categories, more information may have been gathered about these additional social identity categories. For instance, social class and disability were not discussed by any of the students during their interviews, so these identity dimensions were not discussed. Likewise, since the inclusion criteria for this study required that students graduated from rural distant and rural remote high schools, these students' exposure to rural areas varied. Additionally, more information could have been gained about each student if more time was spent with each of them. If these meetings were also spaced further apart from each other, different things about the students' identities may have been highlighted since identities are fluid in nature (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Jones & Abes, 2013). The setting of this study at a selective public university is also counter to Byun et al.'s (2015) findings that rural students are more likely to attend less selective colleges. Future research, therefore, should include narratives from different rural students at different types of higher education institutions to see if the identity perceptions of these diverse rural students vary from those provided here. Moreover, different types of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies could be utilized to explore this topic since all forms of research have their strengths and limitations.

### **Recommendations for Education Professionals**

Even with limitations, the findings from this study can be utilized by P-20 education professionals to inform their knowledge and practices relating to students from rural areas. First and foremost, it is crucial for education professionals to remember that students from rural areas are a heterogeneous student population with various races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, as well as numerous other identity dimensions. These identities not only influence students' individual views of themselves, but also impact how these students are viewed by others and their experiences (Jones & Abes, 2013; Patton et al., 2016). Fulkerson and Thomas (2014) stated, "in reality, rural life is remarkably more diverse and varied than most people imagine" (p. 6). Likewise, all rural areas are not monolithic (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014; Thomas et al., 2011) and there is great variation between rural schools and student demographics depending on their locations (Burdick-Will & Logan, 2017; Greenough & Nelson, 2015).

Beyond these variations, due to the multidimensional meaning of rurality and rural

identity, it is critical that education professionals (and scholars and policy makers) are cognizant of how they are defining the word *rural*. There are multiple official definitions of the word rural within government agencies (USDA, 2019) and the definitions used make a difference within results. For instance, Manly et al. (2020) found that depending on the definitions of rural used within analyses that college degree completion rates varied. Furthermore, Thier et al. (2021) determined only 30% of the educational research studies in their sample used rural definitions and there was much variation between these studies.

Lastly, since identity development is a key aspect of college student development (Patton et al., 2016), education professionals should encourage students from rural areas to explore their identities. These self-reflections should include explorations of how students' places of origin influence their identity perceptions, educational pathways, and future goals. For example, Crain (2018) described ways students' rural backgrounds may influence their academic and career decisions. Student support services could also center on the notions of equity and social justice. This should include, but is not limited to, conversations about race, gender, and sexual orientation. This helps uplift the voices of rural Students of Color, nongender conforming rural students, and LGBTQ rural students. Supporting rural

students in this way disrupts both the rural White narrative and heteronormativity and accepts that rural student populations are continuously diversifying (Schafft & Brown, 2011). By keeping rurality and students' multiple identities in mind, education professionals will be making their programs more inclusive and welcoming for students with diverse backgrounds.

## Conclusion

This study shared the complexity of the identity perceptions of three students, Alejandra, Simon, and Jay, who graduated from high schools in rural areas. The races and ethnicities, genders and biological sexes, and sexual orientations of these students were their salient social identities. Rurality, on the other hand, was not a salient identity for any of these students who even seemed to distance themselves and defensively other being labeled as rural. Nevertheless, the students' identities were interwoven and shaped by their rural experiences and backgrounds, and therefore, should not be ignored by education professionals. By continuing to research students from rural areas and by implementing the recommendations here, education faculty, staff, and administrators can begin to show rural students that they and their rural backgrounds matter.

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