ACCULTURATION AND CONCEALMENT: INVISIBLE
RURAL IDENTITY IN PASSING
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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in
Communication Studies

by
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my people, my family, and my partner.

As a proud Karuk woman, I hope to continue to question the normative structures and weaken the barriers of colonialism that hold strong today. So, I dedicate this to my people as just the first symbol of my promise to continue to fight the systems that oppress us.
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To my partner, Brissa Guadalupe Garcia-Valencia, I am absolutely in awe of the patience you have had as I stumbled through this journey. From beginning to end you have helped me see the joy of stepping off the edge and leaping into the unknown. Without you, this thesis would not exist.
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ABSTRACT

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RURAL IDENTITY IN PASSING

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Master of Arts in Communication Studies

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There has been an increase across university campuses in regard to inclusive practices and their impacts on students from diverse backgrounds. The awareness brought to representation, inclusion and equity factors has sought to improve the experiences of students, campus wide. With the emergence of urbanormativity as a space of power imbalance the door has been opened to examine the campus for its participation in the recreation of this normative structure and the impact it has on the marginalized group, rural students.

This research seeks to examine the experience of 4-year university first year rural students and the ways in which they negotiate their rural identity on campus. Primary focus was on Bourdieu’s capital, acculturation practices, and the impacts of passing identity on sense of belonging. There were interviews with nine rural first-year students
held and then coded for thematic results. Results suggest that rural students’ relation to rural forms of capital are decimated while on campus through acts of self-regulation, concealment and urbanormative structures.

Previous research conducted in this field, specifically around urbanormativity, has been rapidly gaining a foothold, but has been limited in internalized impacts as a relation to the macro-level of structural urbanormativity. More research is needed to understand the ways in which rural identity gets negotiated across time as rural students spend more time on campus.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

In the United States of America, over two-thirds of employment opportunities require college education. The pressure to attend and complete college is higher than ever as it becomes the dominant means for social movement (Nelson, 2018). Universities are becoming more diverse as students from minority cultures and ethnicities gain access to higher education at higher rates than ever before.

The organizational structure of the university has been called into question over the last decade for its lack of diverse representation across campus and the oppressive structure that limits the success of minority students. In response to accusations and research backed with data, universities made both structural and social changes (Erel, 2010). But the notion of diversity on campus is limited in its recognition. Diversity on campus is primarily focused on ethnic differentiation through the addition of representation in peers, instructors, and curriculum.

But a variety of subcultures are left out of the umbrella of diversity, the ability to pass as a majority individual may be one factor. Rural students are an example of a subculture that is rarely recognized as distinctly different from the majority culture. As rural communities struggle with increasing unemployment and poverty rates, a higher rate of rural high school students are attending universities (Nelson, 2018). These students are now facing similar oppressive normative structures that hinder others.
According to Byun, Irvin and Meece (2012), statistically only 28% of rural students attended universities nationally, but in the West it was only 18% of rural students who transitioned from high school to a four-year university. Comparatively 32% of students within the United States overall transition from high school to a four-year university. This is a drastic shift from rural university attendance between 2006 and 2012 which ranged from 35% to 42% attendance, higher than their urban counterparts at the time (Byun, Irvin & Meece, 2012).

Those who do attend the university are faced with disadvantages that are reflected in their reduced graduation rates. Like much of this work, rural student identity will be intertwined with their socioeconomic status. While white middle-class or upper-class rural students shared similar rates of degree completion to their urban and suburban counterparts, approximately 60% to 70% depending upon the type of the university, those from lower socioeconomic status had a reduced rate of degree completion ranging from 45% to 57% depending upon the region. Another important intersection to acknowledge is ethnicity (Fain, 2019). Rural individuals from lower socioeconomic groups are diverse in their ethnicity which may factor into their degree completion rates. There is no statistical research that differentiates each of these intersecting factors and it is crucial to specify that rural identity may be only one factor.

My personally intersecting identities and experiences influenced my passion for this area of work. As a white passing rural undergraduate, I grappled with my identity within the university culture. Throughout my academic experience my background was
always treated as if it was a weight that I needed to leave behind to find success. It made me curious about my fellow rural peers and their experiences on the university campus.

In relation to theoretical expansion, the subculture of rural students allows great insight into aspects of normativity (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017), acculturation choices, and visual and linguistic cues (Wallace, 2017). Previous research has analyzed experiences of immigrant students, who display phenological and linguistic differences that quickly allow others and the organization to differentiate their status (Erel, 2010). Research has also examined the acculturation processes of subgroups within American culture, such as African American and Indigenous populations, but the examinations of these groups rarely discuss passing individuals (Dias, Rocha, Tateo, & Marsico, 2021; Wallace, 2017).

As our country grows more diverse and ethnicity becomes presented phenologically in varying forms it is crucial to try to understand what other factors are at play. By examining rural students, phenological differences are removed in that they can be as ethnically diverse as the rest of the population. Rural students with phenological or linguistic differences may be compared to the prior research where their only difference would be related to their invisible rural identity (Crusan, 2018).

The rural students in higher education share the same language and can pass as part of the host culture. These students are only differentiated as rural by their own self-disclosure. Through socialization, rural students have differences in capitals compared to urban students, similar to each group previously evaluated and rural students are within a system that has a normative structure of oppression built into the university
(urbanormativity) (Nelson, 2018). But the opening in the scholarship is the lack of explicit presentation of differentiation and the impact on acculturation choices made in order for the rural student to achieve a sense of belonging in the higher education system.

Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to further the scholarship around rural university student experiences with the urbanormitive system of the university campus. Previous works have examined the ways in which universities and other organizations perpetuate urbanormativity. This has opened the scholarship up to thoughtful examination as an oppressive structure for marginalized individuals. Research has shown that rural university students struggle to persist and succeed within the university system comparatively to their urban counterparts.

This study wants to examine the ways in which the underlying urbanormative structures on campus impact rural first-year university students. These narratives have yet to be analyzed in scholarship. By studying these individuals, the impacts of urbanormativity on Bourdieuan capitals, acculturation and ultimately the sense of belonging of rural students can become more thoroughly understood and provide insight to their struggles.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways do rural students negotiate their rural identity on the university campus?
2. In what ways do rural students develop a sense of belonging on campus?

New scholarship examining the urbanormativity within organizational structures, such as the university campus, seeks to highlight the pervasiveness of urbanity on a macro-level and meso-level. However, the hegemonic reproductions of urbanormative traits have yet to be examined in relation to acculturation or capital negotiations by rural individuals. As a concealable identity rural students provide a unique phenomenon for examination. This study’s main goal is to understand the ways in which rural students negotiate their rural identity and what are the implications of these communicative acts for their sense of belonging on campus.

Definition of Terms

Urbanormativity

In articulating the concept of urbanormativity, critical rural scholars analogize to heteronormativity, which reveals how heterosexuality is constructed as “the benchmark for sexual normalcy.” In the same way that “straight” is the dominant sexuality group, urban is the dominant geographical group, leaving the rural remnant a marginalized other whose lives appear anomalous (Pruitt & Vanegas, 2019, p 86). Stereotype Threat

“Stereotype threat is the phenomenon in which members of a stereotyped group worry that their performance on an evaluative task will be judged according to a negative
group stereotype indicating inferiority in the domain” (Casad, Hale, & Wachs, 2017, p 514).

Acculturation

“Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups”. Although acculturation is a neutral term in principle (that is, change may take place in either or both groups), in practice acculturation tends to induce more change in one of the groups (termed the acculturating group in this article) than in the other (Berry, 1994, p 7).

Sense of Belonging

Students’ sense of belonging at school (SOBAS) is central to both their psychosocial well-being and their academic success. SOBAS is a psychological state in which students “view schooling as essential to their long-term well-being, as reflected in their participation in academic and non-academic pursuits” and “relations with school staff and other students” (Chiu, Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2016, p 175).

Passing

Passing is the research of oneself by trying to look and to be seen as a member of a social group by assuming its features. Individuals performing this process are willing to undergo several physical and behavioral changes to achieve this aspiration. Passing generally occurs among members of minority groups suffering discrimination who want to diminish the psycho-social discomfort of their experience. (Dias, Rocha, Tateo, & Marsico, 2021, p 690)
Limitations of the Study

As with any research, there are limitations to this study. Since this research focuses on an identity that requires self-disclosure it is at its premise limited in the number and type of individuals who volunteer to participate. Those who volunteer may have experiences that allow them to feel more confident with self-disclosure in comparison to those who fear repercussions of self-identifying as rural. This can be a limiting factor as representative of all rural university student experiences.

This study is also limited by the safety protocols of COVID-19 which did not allow for face-to-face interview practices. The shift to virtual interviewing processes becomes limiting as it sits on the premise of easy access to internet. The accessibility of technology is a normative structure of urban living. In order to access high-speed internet many of the participants were required to use a room within the university library to participate.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research shows that the higher education system is embedded with normative structures that are oppressive to groups of students. Urbanormative structure within the organization, higher education, is a primary factor in rural student acculturation (Nelson, 2018). The sense of belonging in rural students is more internal than external. As there are no phenological or linguistic presentations rural students are unable to establish a sense of representation among bodies of students or faculty. These students must negotiate their acculturation processes solely on their interactions with peers (Celeste, Meeussen, & Phalet, 2016), the institution, and capital acquisition.

The following literature review connects various theories to highlight gaps of literature around the experiences of rural students in higher education. First, examining the underlying power structure of urbanormativity in the United States. Bourdieu’s theory of capital is then analyzed to understand the rural student’s access to resources of capital and the influence of power that influences students to adjust through acculturation. Acculturation can be influenced by the organization and peers of similar or opposing backgrounds (Celeste, Meeussen, & Phalet, 2016). The theory of acculturation highlights the unique experience of rural students as they are able to conceal their minority identity as “passing”. These passing individuals may experience issues with identity dissonance, stereotype threat and a sense of belonging (Nentwich, Poppen, Schalin, & Vogt, 2013).
While vast research has been done on sense of belonging scholarship has yet to examine the experiences of students with concealed identities and the influence it may have on their sense of belonging on campus.

Urbanormativity in the University

It is important first to establish the underlying power structure, urbanormativity, within the United States in regard to a rural student’s experience in higher education. The power structure will be influencing all aspects of research in the area of rural students as a significant factor into their minority status on campus. Since urbanormativity is pervasive throughout the culture and society it impacts both the students’ perceptions of self-identity, their access to resources and the construction of social arenas such as the university campus.

Urbanormativity is the underlying power structure that persists throughout all aspects of this work on rural students. Urbanormativity is a socially constructed power dynamic in which culturally urban spaces dominate over rural spaces. The values and interests of urban areas are given more attention in the media, recreated in organizational structures and become ingrained in social concepts. While urbanormativity is a power structure that minimizes rural spaces the claim is in no way an act of urban individuals to perpetrate against their rural counterparts but an underlying schema that influences all individuals in society into viewing urban values as normative. Like many power structures they become hegemonic and invade both the dominant and the dominated groups.
In studying rural students, urbanormativity has an impact upon the attitude of the dominant culture, urban students or institutions. As with other forms of normative relationships urbanormativity is the process in which the certain aspects of urban lifestyle or cultural practices have become ubiquitous with normal (Phillips & Smith, 2018; Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017). In the process of creating a boundary around normal, there is the creation of a space of otherness (Pruitt, & Vanegas, 2019).

One example of urbanormativity is the notion of technological access. In the current climate of CoVID-19 many individuals were required to continue their work and education at home through online formats. The notion that the internet is readily accessible to all individuals within an organization is a production of urbanormativity (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020). In urban environments there are myriad options for internet providers and service types ranging from high speed to ultra-high speed internet options. One can purchase the plan and have high speed internet the very same day.

Internet accessibility is not the same in rural environments. Most rural communities have no option to connect into an already established internet grid system (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020). The options for rural communities are limited to forms of satellite internet. Satellite internet packages are drastically higher in cost, have lower processing speeds, have low data caps and are notoriously unreliable. In the environment of CoVID-19 this has an impact on all levels of family members both socially and economically.

The younger members of the family have reduced experiences of school in a virtual world where they may be unable to interact or attend at full length. Younger
members are unable to use the internet like a renewable resource and must manage their internet usage affecting both their schooling and social connections with other students who are located in urban environments.

The older working members of the family are faced with a dilemma. They have to balance the spending to gather more data in order to perform the job duties that they do to receive their income. Rural adults face the question of whether their job is sustainable in a virtual capacity with the internet available to them.

While cost of the internet is a primary concern there is also the concern with reliability. With multiple people in the home being expected to use the internet to continue with all aspects of life (work, school, social meetings, etc.) rural homes must parcel out the internet as a finite source and define priorities around these aspects. The organizations that have an expectation of remote work primarily exist in the urban technology driven centers where internet is an unlimited source, and it is just one way in which those in rural areas are othered (Phillips & Smith, 2018).

Another example is the university campus as a collection of urban symbols. When a rural student steps onto the campus grounds the symbols that greet them are those of urban origination (Auer, 2010). Some of the initial symbols are the parking meters and garages that exist along the edges of campus and signal urbanity. Parking is not a finite commodity in a rural setting. Next, as you step on campus there is the collection of multilevel buildings. These buildings are separated by less than 50 yards from one another and while smatterings of grass may exist, they are the finite commodity on campus. For a rural individual these are all symbolic of an urban setting. While the
The othering of rural communities has wide ranging impacts from the self-identification of rural individuals, their access to resources, and the integration of it into social arenas. When oneself identifies with a group they internalize many of the social constructs that consist within that identity. As urbanormativity is hegemonically pervasive it also gets reproduced within the self-identification (Phillips & Smith, 2018). This has resulted in a variety of narratives that rural individuals may use to understand their identity. One example is the townie stereotype which consists of individuals who remain within the rural community. These individuals are portrayed as the ultimate loser in the community, the one who didn’t or couldn’t make it out. Through these stereotypes the theme underlyingly creates a relationship between success and leaving rural areas for urban ones. This is just one example, but it helps to show the ways in which it can damage the identification within rural areas and create a sense that a successful rural individual is the one who escapes that identity. Beyond self-identification the prior example of internet access allows for insight into resources access. Lastly it is crucial to understand urbanormative impacts on social arenas, specifically in this work the university campus.

The othering of rural communities is not a new occurrence brought about by the wave of the internet but has been a consistent process throughout history as technology
has risen in urban areas. Urban areas became centers of expansion and labor opportunities that drove individuals from rural communities to urban ones (Pruitt, & Vanegas, 2019). The university integrates these larger power structures, such as urbanormativity, into the university culture and structure (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017).

According to Thomas and Fulkerson (2020), universities “exhibit a culture of free expression and scholarly meritocracy, but these are accompanied by rigid hierarchies of social class.” (p 25). Universities are organizations that must be examined for their ability to perpetuate normative structures of power that marginalize specific groups. They play a further role in socializing the expectations of society as individuals emerge from adolescence into adulthood.

Universities are specifically integrated with urbanormativity through their relationship with urban society. Like the urban social values, the university pursues technological advancement and is dependent upon the collection of populations in small areas (Thomas & Fulkerson, 2020). The university exists as a miniature version of an urban environment imbued with all the urban values (Pruitt, & Vanegas, 2019).

Overall urbanormativity plays a significant role in the rural student’s experience through their self-identification, access to resources and organizational environment. With the particular emphasis on class and capital as an aspect of organizational urbanormativity Bourdieu’s theory around capital can extend insight into the experience of rural students in higher education organizations.
Bourdieu’s Capital

The theories of Bourdieu provide particular insight into the arbitrariness of cultures as they interact with one another. Through examining the fields, habitus and capital within cultures it highlights the ways in which groups of power maintain control using these constructs. For the rural student, it allows a deeper understanding of their marginalization by creating constructs, fields, habitus, and capital, that they do not have access to.

Bourdieu wanted to understand the social world using capital as his means. But he was quick to delineate from the strictly economic versions of capital and operationalized capital in a form other than just financial. For Bourdieu, “a capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it” (Wacquant, 1998, p 223)

Bourdieu’s economic capital is the most easily conceptualized. It is the financial assets that an individual has ranging from stocks to property. Bourdieu considered economic capital responsible for social class division but that it was not only acquired through the direct trade of labor but could be attributed to all forms of capital in certain arenas (Gilleard, 2020).

Bourdieu perceived social capitals as networks or webs of connection that an individual can access. These networks or webs can form through in-group membership or through institutions. In-group membership can include both groups that are established
upon birth such as family members or by choice such as with friends or community members. Institutionalized social capital is when networks and connections develop as a result of the organization such as with co-workers or peers in classrooms. These networks are salient which can allow for one relationship to embody both in-group social capital and institutionalized social capital (Baker, Brown & Williams, 2014).

The overlapping of connections and networks exponentially increases their value (Bourdieu, 1986). The value of these networks can be evaluated on the basis of strength but also the type of relationships, breadth v. depth. Connections can be deemed weak v. strong based on the level of reciprocity. Networks can also be examined for their types of relationships. Some networks may have breadth which means that the network is expansive with a large number of unique connections. Other networks can have less connections but have depth in their connections. Depth has been shown to increase levels of reciprocity while breadth has been shown to give an individual more diverse resource access (Gilleard, 2020).

Bourdieu considered cultural capital closely tied with education (Robbins, 2005). Cultural capital can be broken down into three aspects: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. Embodied forms of cultural capital include attitudes, habits and practices (Gilleard, 2020; Robbins, 2005). The objectified form of cultural capital includes objects that hold value within a specific culture. The third form of cultural capital is institutionalized which is associated with formalized achievements. These achievements can be employment or educational qualifications that one possesses.
(Bourdieu, 1986). Each form of capital can be deployed in order to gain advantage for the user (Robbins, 2005).

The “two ‘non-financial’ forms, cultural and social capital, constitute social resources that are accumulated by both groups and individuals, products of effort and of work, acquired and transferred, which build up stocks of capital whose value subsequently becomes accessible to a group or individual” (Bourdieu, 1986, p 251).

Symbolic capital plays a role in the interchange between subjective and objective structures of capital. Symbolic capital encompasses all capital that is misrecognized (Bourdieu, 1986). While the forms of capital all have objective forms, they must undergo a space of subjectivity in order to be converted from one form to another (Robbins, 2005). This inherent transactionality is impossible to measure but exists in institutionalized habitus within a particular social field. In order to understand the alchemy of symbolic capital one must also understand Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field (Gilleard, 2020).

Habitus is not such a clear concept. Bourdieu uses the example of a baseball player hitting a 95 mile per hour fastball. Over time and experience the baseball player is able to ‘know’ when to swing and when not to. When asked, the knowledge is ambiguous, and the decision making is unable to be explained. This knowledge becomes second-hand and indiscernible between cognitive decision to action (Gilleard, 2020).

Lois Wacquant defines habitus as “the system of durable and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge, and act in the world” (Wacquant, 1998, p
Habitus constitutes the attitudes, assumptions and expectations of the objective standing of the group in relation to others and the subjective sense of belonging. The objective standing and the subjective sense of belonging play a dual role in establishing an individual's or group's particular standing.

The habitus both shapes and is shaped by the capital that is accessible to the individual. Over time as individuals interact with unequal social stratification in society, they internalize the practices needed in order to navigate similar experiences in the future. The development of these behaviors further hegemonize existing hierarchical power structures. Social positioning is decided when “the habitus and capital accessibility to a class group or category of persons constitute the site of symbolic struggles over power and position and identity within a particular field.” (Gilleard, 2020, p 3).

Fields are the social arena in which capital is negotiated between individuals, relationships or organizations. These social arenas can include work, education, sport, leisure, etc. Each field maintains a specific set or code of complex social relations agents engage in daily. Fields by nature then become hierarchically structured. Although the boundaries of these fields can become blurred, as they reside in multidimensional spaces of society, they are distinctly present (Gilleard, 2020).

Bourdieu (1986) explains that the field of power is horizontal and pervades into every field of society. The field of power is where the exchange rate of capital is struggled over (Gilleard, 2020). The field of power has been considered the space where normative structure exists and pervades each form of capital. By invading all fields, the field of power is also included in the field of higher education.
Coleman and Bourdieu state that varying forms of capital are factors in pushing individuals in a society towards educational attainment in the field of higher education (Gilleard, 2020). Individuals who resist the preferred symbolic capital of the organization face barriers to achievement. Consequently, individuals from other cultures face barriers to achieving a bachelor’s degree in the field of higher education (Robbins, 2005).

The dominant culture is able to impose their preferred cultural values, standards and styles through normative structures. These normative structures are legitimized and reproduced due to the ability of the dominant culture to control the field of power in which symbolic capital is given value (Robbins, 2005). When a nondominant culture and the dominant culture interact whether in an individual, group or institution acculturation occurs.

Arbitrariness of Culture and Power

Schools and higher education systems are the “chief structural mechanism for class-based reproduction and social stratification of society, through their assertion and claim to a monopoly of legitimate inculcation of legitimate culture” (Moore, 2004, p 447). Bourdieu (1986) asserts that the objective structures have a reciprocal relationship with the habitus of the normative or dominant social group. The structure is embedded with the habitus of the majority, and it functions by individuals reproducing the behaviors of the majority group. This process reifies the power of the structure and eventually develops a sense that the structure and the habitus cannot be misaligned (Bourdieu, 2018).
While those within the majority group are able to access and use their established habitus in success with the organization those from the minority groups suffer (Moore, 2004). Those from minority groups may not have access to the habitus that are considered required in order for the system to function. But the innateness of the habitus is a falsehood created and reified by those in power (Bourdieu, 2018).

Although the habitus of the organization is a falsehood it still maintains power and influences all layers of the organization specifically in their social stratification. Individuals from minority social groups enter the organization and the interaction influences the individuals to adapt (Bourdieu, 2018).

For rural students they must enter an organization embedded with an urban habitus. The university culture and structure reinforce the urban habitus. Rural students are in a situation where they must adapt their habitus in order to be successful within the organization. In order for one to adapt they must use an acculturation process and accommodate their communication. Universities are an optimal site to examine the acculturation process of individuals who do not have access to the capital of the legitimate culture of the university (Moore, 2004; Bourdieu, 2018).

Although Bourdieu’s theory is based in the arbitrariness of culture that does not mean it is insignificant but that it is not innate to the culture but a social construction of those in power recreated throughout systems and the populace. The individual from outside the culture must find a way to access the constructs that provide them the ability to use social resources. Acculturation theory provides an optimal theoretical backbone to
try to understand how rural students adjust their identities and outward projections of self in order to gain access to resources.

Acculturation

In order to better understand the experience of rural students in higher education, acculturation theory allows for the examination of the process individuals go through when they experience a conflict between their original culture and the culture they are entering. While rural students are not leaving their country of origin, they are leaving a subculture that is a minority in relation to the urban and rural divide. Acculturation theory has long been used to understand the experiences of students in minority identities and the influences on the choices that are made in regard to their future identity adjustments.

Berry’s (1997) model of acculturation uses two dimensions to describe the ways in which ethnic/cultural minorities adapt when migrating into a new country. While the primary scholarship focuses on immigrating individuals (Erel, 2010), it has also been applied to cultural minorities within their country of origin that interact with a mainstream culture that differs from their own. The two dimensions of acculturation are culture adoption and culture maintenance (Berry, 1997; Robbins, 2005).

Culture adoption (CA) is when the individual or group highly identifies and adjusts to the dominant culture. Culture maintenance (CM) is when the individual continues to hold their identification with their original culture. Four types of acculturation practices are developed from the two dimensions: integration (High CM;
High CA); acculturation (Low CM; High CA); separation (High CM; Low CA) and marginalization (Low CM; Low CA) (Berry, 1997).

Although the model shows each type as equivalent, it is largely influenced by the acculturation norms of both in-group and out-group members. In-group members for the minority student serve as a connection to prior capital (Prieto, Sagafi-nejad, & Janamanchi, 2013). The individual is able to continue to use prior established capital without fears of rejection. The ability to access this capital has shown to lead rural university students to graduate at higher rates (Nelson, 2019). In-group members primarily influence an individual's culture maintenance leading towards two acculturation practices: integration and separation.

While early scholarship focused on creating spaces that allow minority individuals and groups spaces and legitimacy (Prieto, Sagafi-nejad, & Janamanchi, 2013), current research has shown that the acculturational norms of out-group peers who are part of the dominant culture have significant influence on acculturation choices (Celeste, Meeussen, & Phalet, 2016). Out-group influence on acculturation practices exist in the dimension of cultural adoption. The norm of the dominant group is that the individual from the minority group would achieve high identification with the mainstream culture (Schwartz, Galliher, and Domenech Rodriguez, 2011). High identification of the mainstream culture results in assimilation or integration acculturation choices (Ng, 2007; Robbins, 2005).

Another influence on acculturation is the attitude of the dominant culture toward the minority culture group (Celeste, Meeussen, & Phalet, 2016). Each is specific to the
cultural group and can develop into normative structures. Acculturation scholarship has previously examined normative structures based on ethnicity, race, and gender (Prieto, Sagafi-nejad, & Janamanchi, 2013; Wallace, 2017), but only recently has the theoretical standpoint been used in relation to rural versus urban students.

Urbanormativity influences how individuals from the dominant group interact and influence rural students similarly to the impacts of racism on interactions with minority ethnic groups (Ng, 2007; Schwartz, Galliher, and Domenech Rodriguez, 2011). Normative structural impacts are not unique to the rural student experience (Tip, Gonzalez, Brown, Tezanos-Pinto, Saavedra, Zagefka, & Celeste, 2015). Across scholarship of acculturation immigrant groups and minority ethnic cultures have had their experiences with higher education examined (Erel, 2010; Wallace, 2017). Results of acculturation research have led universities to establish social organizations with specific ethnic or cultural membership such as clubs, sororities/fraternities, programs, etc. As discussed above these groups allow the individual to maintain high identity with their original culture through in-group membership with shared attachment (Ng, 2007; Prieto, Sagafi-nejad, & Janamanchi, 2013).

Rural students share similar issues to the minority groups, but they are a unique subset in which their outsider status is completely invisible to the dominant group (Crusan, 2018; Tip et. al., 2015). While immigrants and other previously studied ethnic minority groups (African Americans, Native Americans, etc.), their minority identity can be assumed by the dominant group members either through their phenological expressions or in linguistic qualities (Erel, 2010). Rural students do not face similar
struggles. Rural students have access to the language, unhindered by an accent, and are not homogenous phenologically. While this has the benefits for the student’s interactions with peers in the dominant culture it does not allow for the student to have access to peers of similar backgrounds (Celeste, Meeussen, & Phalet, 2016). Without a way to establish cultural maintenance on campus the choices of acculturation become limited and influence the individual towards assimilation or marginalization.

Although rural students are a unique subset, their minority status in the dynamic of urbanormativity creates a similar conflict of culture to those from minority ethnic groups. While they do not share equivalent struggles due to the lack of phenological or linguistic cues of difference they do share the acculturation process that occurs when they are in a normatively structured organization. The acculturation process is contextual, and the uniqueness of rural students provides an opening for scholarship to examine its impact on acculturation.

“Passing” Identity

The invisibility of ruralness in students on the university campus creates a unique space in which identity must be self-disclosed. Rural students as a subset have yet to be examined through the lens of invisible identity. This study will use invisible or “passing” identity in order to better understand the experiences of rural students in relation to identity concealment, identity dissonance, and sense of belonging. Before universities moved to establish LGBTQ+ clubs and curriculum, sexual minority students struggled to find other sexual minority individuals without public self-disclosure. Queer studies can
give us some insight into the impact of invisibility and acculturation that may be occurring in rural students.

Before using a theoretical standpoint that has been devoted to understanding the self-disclosure of LGBTQ+ individuals it is crucial to acknowledge the drastic differences between the self-disclosure of sexual orientation or sexual minority identity and rural identity. The act of self-disclosure for LGBTQ+ can mean life or death, it is the epitome of risk to disclose. The level of risk in relation to self-disclosure cannot compare between these two groups. The theoretical standpoint will provide insight into the process and understanding of self-disclosure choices of invisible identities but in no way is equating the risks of self-disclosure between rural and LGBTQ+ individuals. The term “passing” will be borrowed for the underlying process of intentional concealment of identity.

Since specific aspects of rural student habitus can align with the habitus of the university there is a level in which these individuals are “passing” as urban students (Dias, Rocha, Tateo, & Marsico, 2021). Queer studies have developed limited scholarship around capital in situations in which the nonnormative individual is able to perform normative behaviors by aligning with dominant habitus (Dobai & Hopkins, 2021).

According to Butler (1990), individuals with minority identities that are able to perform in a normative fashion are less likely to self-disclose. Since they are passing as normative the act of self-disclosure becomes an act of self-othering (Dias, Rocha, Tateo, & Marsico, 2021). In order to continue as passing communication accommodations in
Invisible identities are an area that is rarely studied outside of specific regions of scholarship, queer studies and chronic illness (DeJordy, 2008). But invisible identities provide a unique phenomenon in which the individual must intentionally choose to conceal or disclose their identity when developing social relationships (Dobai & Hopkins, 2021). Similar to queer students, rural students must negotiate whether the risk and benefits of the disclosure of their minority identity. Once again, it is important to acknowledge that the risks and benefits exist for both groups but are drastically different for LGBTQ+, who’s risks consist to the point of mortality.

While much of the literature has focused on the benefits of disclosure and its impacts little has been studied in regard to those who choose to conceal their identity (DeJordy, 2008). Croteau and Hedstrom (1993) argue that while the passing individual’s “know and anticipate all too well the possible negative consequences of coming out to others in work settings,” they “fail to consider the potential benefits and positive consequences as strongly” (p. 205).

The concealment of identity can be performed in a multitude of communicative choices. Many individuals deliberately decide not to reveal their stigmatized identity in an organizational setting (DeJordy, 2008). While unintentional passing can occur in transaction-based interactions with exposure and frequency the individual must choose to continue concealment of their identity. As relationships develop through disclosure of the
appropriate amount of personal information over time the act of concealment becomes conscious and intentional (Dobai & Hopkins, 2021).

Clair, Joy, and MacLean (2005), discuss three tactics used by individuals intentionally passing their invisible identity. The tactics of passing are fabrication, concealment, and discretion. These can be used varyingly in different contexts from creating false information to avoiding conversations that may expose their invisible identity (Helens-Hart, 2017). Tactics of passing are not exclusive and can be interchanged throughout interactions (Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2013).

The choice to conceal or disclose an invisible identity is influenced by the risks and benefits of disclosure in regard to intrapersonal, interpersonal relationships and organizational implications (Quinn, 2017). It is important to note that although literature has been profound in the benefits of disclosure of identity, individuals continuously choose to conceal their identity for decades within organizations (DeJordy, 2008). The goal of passing is to achieve successful performance conformity.

Conformity in the theoretical structure of acculturation is assimilation. Conformity is the outward social projection of identification with the majority identity (Quinn, 2017). Assimilation is the most successful form as the individual shifts from not only outward projection of conformity but internal conformity. Passing and acculturation choices are influenced by the assumed costs and benefits of identity (DeJordy, 2008). Bourdieu's theory of capital can bring insight into how individuals negotiate the costs and benefits of passing as an urban individual and why in light of the scholarship many
choose to continue deliberate concealment of their identity in organizational settings (Pfeffer, 2021).

The examination of costs and benefits is directly connected to capital whether social, economic, or cultural. An individual who is passing is gaining access to the sets of capital that the majority has (benefits) and losing or reducing the access to the capital from their origin culture (costs). Costs and benefits are influenced by the context such that within an organization where the identity is devalued the costs may appear far less drastic and the benefits overwhelming in comparison (Crymble, 2012).

For rural students the cost of reducing their connection to their rural culture is devalued by the organizational urbanormativity and the benefits are greatly influenced through peer connection and access to economic/symbolic capital that is the main purpose of attending a university. Rural students as a minority group within the university may be more likely to conceal their identity in an effort to move towards assimilation and gain access to urban capital (Andreouli, 2013). While the benefits in the minds of individuals may overwhelmingly outweigh the costs, concealment impacts the identity of the individual, creating dissonance between their performed self and their real self, increasing the likelihood of stereotype threat behavior reduction and reducing the individuals sense of belonging.

Identity Dissonance

Identity dissonance is based on the psychological phenomena of cognitive dissonance. It occurs when an individual hold conflicting identities that creates a
psychological tension (Crymble, 2012). The individual must believe that the two identities are in conflict for the dissonance to occur. Similar to cognitive dissonance the individual feels compelled to find a way to reduce the tension (Joseph, Bader, Walker, Stephens, & Varpio, 2017). Identity dissonance tension can be reduced by rejecting one of the conflicting identities, mitigating the tension through behavioral strategies (distraction), or altering their understanding of the identities in a way that removes tension (Crymble, 2012).

As identity, habitus and capital are deeply intertwined the identity dissonance can correlate to habitus or capital dissonance. In the case of a rural student their rural habitus may be seen as counter to the urban habitus of the university institution. Rural students that choose to conceal their conflicting identity (pass) the dissonance is reduced but exists in the cognitive space of the individual. While passing is focused on an outward manifestation of performed identity the dissonance is an internal process (Nentwich, Poppen, Schalin, & Vogt, 2013). The dissonance that becomes a continual management of habitus performance can lead students to feel they are wearing their passing identity as a mask (Joseph et al., 2017).

The act of passing takes continuous intentional adjustment and awareness that does not allow the individual to forget about their otherness. They are perpetually in a state of otherness being their primary identity that must be concealed in their interactions with others (Nentwich, Poppen, Schalin, & Vogt, 2013). With the state of their otherness being ever present in their interactions and relationship building scholarship must seek to
understand the ways in which that affects their relationships with individuals, peers or instructors, within the university system (Quassoli & Dimitriadis, 2019).

Similar to cognitive dissonance the concept of identity dissonance will result in a form of internal adjustment due to the psychological and emotional toll they carry. The internal adjustments may be reflected in outward manifestations but result from the internal struggle around their conflicting identities that occur due to an outwardly displayed concealment of their rural identity.

*Stereotype Threat*

According to Fischer (2010), in a group setting stereotype threat may be a significant influence on the individual. Individual’s experience anxiety as a result of trying to not conform to the negative stereotype which can result in reduced performance. While initially it may be circumstantial anxiety over time it could result in disengagement from the group or organization.

Substantial scholarship supports stereotype threat as one factor in lower retention rates in marginalized groups on campus. If the marginalized individual is paralyzed with the anxiety of fulfilling a stereotype, specifically ones that establish them as subordinate or inferior on campus, they are more likely to stop attending college before completing their degree (Fischer, 2010).

While a passing individual may be able to hide the identity that holds negative stereotypes, they are still cognitively influenced by the threat of fulfilling the stereotype.
In some cases, they may feel an even greater sense to not fulfill the stereotype as it may be revealing of their status as a marginalized individual (Crymble, 2012).

For rural students on campus this may play a significant role in their reduced completion rates. Stereotypes of rural individuals are predominantly negative (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017). Most commonly rural individuals are associated with a lack of intelligence, naïve, oblivious, aggressive and possessing a more conservative mindset. In a time when political stance plays an even more significant role in one's identity and group acceptance the fear of fulfilling these stereotypes may be even more overwhelming.

Stereotype threat may also play a significant role in the ability to feel they belong on campus or within a group (Fischer, 2010). If the stereotype is that rural students are not intelligent enough to belong on campus the student may struggle to establish connections with peers or instructors as they battle with the anxiety of fulfilling stereotypes. Rural students may be less likely to socialize with peers in their attempts to maintain high grades. They may feel compelled to stay away from certain majors, such as agriculture or animal science, in order to reduce the connection between their identity and stereotypes of rural individuals. Overall, stereotype threat may have a significant impact on individuals' choice of concealment, their sense of belonging and their success on campus.

*Sense of Belonging*
Sense of belonging has long been a measure used in studies of academia and students. Sense of belonging has been tied to graduation rates, G.P.A., and student mental health (Quassoli & Dimitriadis, 2019). It plays an integral role for success students have in their academic career. Yet, it has rarely been used to examine cases of students with invisible or concealed identities such as with rural students.

Sense of belonging is defined as the “extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others – especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 61). The definition and the various others throughout scholarship are all grounded in the student’s perception of this belongingness.

It requires that the individual interprets the response of their peers or teachers to the identity that they convey to them. But the interpretation of the social response to their passing identity is influenced by their active cognitions of otherness (Quassoli & Dimitriadis, 2019).

If a student is passing, then they are actively concealing part of their identity because they feel it does not belong or that others feel it does not belong. The othering of this identity takes up vast cognitive space as its dissonance makes it ever present within social interactions on campus (Nentwich, Poppen, Schalin, & Vogt, 2013).

While a sense of belonging has been examined within groups who may conceal their identity such as LGBTQ+ groups, little has been done to observe the relationship
between the two constructs. The current scholarship does not differentiate the group by their self-disclosure or concealment of identity when discussing a sense of belonging.

RQ1: In what ways do rural students negotiate their rural identity on the university campus?
RQ2: In what ways do rural students develop a sense of belonging on campus?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

When looking at aspects of acculturation choices of students surrounding capital and identity disclosure, it is crucial to investigate the context. These experiences do not happen within a vacuum and require analysis of the subjectivities surrounding each topic. Qualitative inquiry has long been considered the approach that allows for the researcher to retrospectively gain access to a lived experience that quantitative methods would not allow (Linabary & Hamel). As this topic relies on the details of each separate context and the feelings of the participant within, qualitative methods become the obvious choice for how to analyze the narrative of these students.

The topics that will be discussed within these interviews are highly sensitive and require a reduction in fear of social exposure. Synchronous virtual interviews can provide a sense of safety from social pressures through the exclusivity (Tracy, 2019). Synchronous virtual interviews can also work to remove the pressure of power dynamics. Not only do interviews allow for relationships to be developed between the interviewer and interviewee but the participant is able to control whether the access to their visual appearance. By reducing the power dynamic rural students will feel free to openly participate as there is no sense of interviewer/interviewee hierarchy or social exposure (Tracy, 2019). By reviewing these dynamics and how they may interrupt the process of identity representation it was important to try to reduce the effects by using synchronous virtual interviews.
The individual was able to designate a time when they would like to complete the interview through a google form. Since the interview was virtual, individuals were encouraged to choose a space in which they feel comfortable discussing topics of their rural identity. This gave individuals the ability to find the time and privacy that would be necessary to describe the narrative in detail in a space where they feel safe to do so (Linabary & Hamel, 2017).

Through my own experiences as a student on campus I was able to provide students with advice on how to rent rooms in the library or find free internet areas in which they would have privacy to complete the interview. I hoped that this would increase accessibility for those who may reside in rural homes where the internet is less available.

Participants

For this study the focus will be on students attending a mid-sized western university in the United States, above the age of 18, who graduated from a high school of less than 500 people and resided within a community of less than 15,000 population. Rural students have an invisible stigmatized identity within the university. In order to have the legal ability to consent the individual must be over the age of 18.

Procedures

Once approval from the institutional review board (IRB) was received, an email was sent to students who completed CMST 131, a primarily first-year student attended communication course in the previous semester. The email asked students to participate if
they met the two criteria: 1) graduated from a high school of less than 500 individuals, 2) resided in a community of less than 15,000 people at the time of graduation. For those that fit the criteria and chose to participate a link was provided at the bottom of the email to the questionnaire. Individuals were able to follow the link in order to review the informed consent and answer demographic questions such as age, ethnicity, location of origin, and high school population size. The initial questionnaire also served to verify that individuals did meet the criteria necessary to participate. The participants were assured about their confidentiality and encouraged to use a pseudonym in answering questions. The participants were then sent a new link through email upon their acceptance into the study which allowed them to schedule an hour-long interview.

The questions within the interview process examine sense of belonging, high school experiences and university experiences in relation to their rural identity (see Appendix B). I used my own experiences as a source of reflection in order to create questions that would come from a space of rural centeredness and reduce any feelings that I myself held about any negative stereotypes of the individual. While I did not start my interviews by explaining my identity throughout the interviews eight out of nine individuals asked me questions about my background.

Emergent-grounded theory approach was used in order to find relationships that may emerge between data and the categories (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). The method of open coding was used, followed by the constant-comparison method in order to search for commonalities. Through the use of these approaches, I was able to find emergent 3 themes.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Eight individuals filled out the Google Form and fit the criteria to become participants. Only seven of those individuals responded to the follow up email and scheduled interviews. Two more individuals were brought into the study through their connections to original participants, resulting in a total of nine interviews.

Interviews were conducted with university students who identified themselves as being rural and having fit the criteria of participation. The interviews ranged in time from approximately 15 minutes to 53 minutes. The average time for interviews was 29 minutes. All nine interviews were recorded with both audio and visual. After the session ended each interview was transcribed.

Participants were made up of five female students and four male students. Ethnicity ranged as individuals were allowed to self-identify their ethnicity instead of a categorical selection. Three students described themselves as Hispanic; three identified as having multiple ethnicities; two chose not to answer and one defined themselves as white. All considered themselves white passing in their physical representations.

Discussion

The emergent-grounded theory approach was used in order to analyze the data. Through open coding and the use of constant comparative method I was able to find
multiple categories within the data. Examples from the data will be given with any identifying information removed in order to keep their answers and confidentiality intact.

Social Capital Disintegration - Aloneness/Loneliness

The theme of aloneness and loneliness emerged throughout the interview process. Within this study I differentiated between the emotion of being cut off from others, loneliness and the act of not seeking connection, aloneness. While loneliness was framed by individuals as forced upon them by the circumstance, aloneness was framed as a sacrifice or rite of passage within this context. While these are separated from one another both can be examined through their relation to social capital incongruencies between rural and social spaces.

Loneliness was more prominent in female participant responses than the male responses. Only one out of the four male participants mentioned feelings of loneliness. “At home it's not just my parents but I had my cousins, my grandparents, everyone. It's just not the same here. Here everyone is a stranger and there are no strangers at home.”

Multiple participants spoke about their families as a prominent network deeply tied to home. This makes sense if the rural student has social capital based in networks of depth instead of breadth. A disconnection by distance removes a crucial aspect of their original social building habitus which is that networks are built through repetitive exposures (Turner & Edmunds, 2002). Once removed from the area they are no longer continually reconnecting with these connections on the repetitive basis they are used to. But it was not just the connection that they had lost but the lack of connection they felt on campus. Many related this loneliness to the size of campus and the amount of people. “It’s so big
you just feel a bit lost, alone. I meet people all the time but it's just hi and bye. I see them on campus, but they don't even waive or anything. It's like you are no one to most people here.”. Not only were the rural individuals disconnected from the rural social capital in which they were used to they were unprepared to create connections in the urban setting. Whereas vast networking may be more common for urban students to the rural individual it can develop a sense of disconnection. The rural individual does not have habitus to create quick relationships with minimal interaction rates.

Many saw their relationships on campus as lacking substance. This may also be explained by Bourdieu’s theory in relation to social capital and the aspects of depth versus breadth in social relationships (Bourdieu, 1986). While rural individuals are used to relationships based on depth the campus culture is based more in creating larger networks of connection, breadth. On campus rural students experience a very different classroom experience than their prior education experiences. Their peers are varied in each classroom with new instructors that are rarely repeated. On campus this helps develop a vast network of acquaintances, yet, for the rural student it requires them to learn the ability to form quick bonds and access the value within those vast networks. As a result, rural students may be unable to create the kinds of connections they are used to, leaving them feeling disconnected from prior social relationships while being unable to find value in the new types of relationships formed on campus.

The inability to access prior social capital or use urban forms of social capital can result in a variety of impacts on the rural students' success on the urban campus. Loneliness has not only been shown to be detrimental to students academically but also to
their overall mental health while on campus. Feelings of isolation on campus have been linked to drop out rates but also to cases of self-harm.

While loneliness was a result of the environment of the campus aloneness was reported as being actively participated in by the rural student. Aloneness was more prominent among the male participants. Aloneness, in this case, is the belief that one must choose to disconnect from social relationships as a rite of passage or to reach a goal. “I need to show people I can do this on my own. If I can’t do this alone, how can I ever succeed? I might as well go home.”

Many participants emphasized the lack of social relationships as being necessary to their success. It was almost presented as a space of transition for these individuals, that if they could make it through being alone, they would undergo a metamorphosis of belonging. Aloneness became the passage to greater success that they must endure. “I am alone here. I am the first of my family to go to college. They will never understand. But neither do my classmates. It's hard sometimes but I need to do this for my family. It’s the only way to get the good life.” These statements of aloneness as a sacrifice or rite of passage may also be a cognitive position to acculturation occurring. In order to reach their end goal of completing school or being successful they had to undergo a transformation into what they perceived as urban, which required detaching from previous social ties. They are trying to transition from the rural forms of social capital and shift to their perceived version of urban capital. Aloneness was just one form that this transition of acculturation presents as. By cutting themselves off to their previous social ties they essentially reduce their acculturation options to two, assimilation or
marginalization (Berry, 1997). For some the assimilation may occur as they view it as a rite of passage that is shared among university students on campus. While they feel they need to be alone, they see it as all of the students undergoing this aloneness in a way that is antithetical to aloneness. But there is also the possibility of marginalization in which the individual does not connect with either group. They feel the need for aloneness to be successful, but they see it as an oppressive act that they must endure. Instead of being in it together this is something they suffer due to their original identity. It can cause them to resent who they believe to be the other side or binary to their identity such as either the urban students or the university campus. This is especially true if they find that they lack the habitus to form new bonds. Instead of trying to perform the majority habitus they can turn away and remove themselves from creating even weak social ties (Gilleard, 2020).

In either case they saw aloneness as a means to an end. While participants continuously had an image of what they would get from their experiences these ideals were not concrete. They idealized what their life would be like after college as having access to so much more that college was the gatekeeper to a better life.

Whether looking at aloneness or loneliness expressions these individuals were undergoing a struggle over social capital. The difference being removal from social ties or the perceived need to abandon those ties they both revolve around the lack of maintenance of rural social capital.
Throughout the interviews topics of concealment were repetitively tied to perceived or explicit stereotypes of others, specifically peers. When asked about disclosure of their identity to classmates on the university campus, individuals continuously contextualized their concealment as resulting from fears of being stereotyped. These fears were ever present throughout the interview even as many concealed their identity and felt only a small percentage of individuals knew about their rural identity. The fear of being associated with the negative stereotypes superseded the probability that people would find out which aligns with research on stereotype threat (Crymble, 2012). Stereotypes of some kind were brought up in varying degrees by each participant. These stereotypes ranged from political associations to sexual activities. Each individual felt that these stereotypes were pervasive and would be felt by their peers upon their disclosure of rural status. “I don’t consider myself rural. I was there because of my parents. It wasn’t me. I am not some close-minded backwoods republican. So, I don’t state that to others because it isn’t who I am.” Many of these participants rejected aspects of the stereotype and felt that it was not representative of their actual lived experiences. The rejection from their sense of self is a prime example of stereotype threat at play in which these individuals wish to distance themselves as far from the stereotype as possible.

Although many spoke about how they did not fit the stereotype they rarely spoke about their town or community as being different. The perspective was consistently individualistic. Each participant clarified that the stereotypes did not fit them, but few spoke to their families, communities or rural culture. This is an important aspect because
it solidifies the underlying urbanormativity that is being hegemonically reproduced by rural students. Instead of fighting the stereotype as being misrepresentative of the community at large and asking others to question this normative structure they are fighting to designate themselves as different. Not only do they play into the dynamic of rurality as something to avoid but the rural students participate in the reinforcement of stereotypes.

Multiple participants used terms that are commonly integrated into the negative portray rural communities such as hick, redneck, backwoods, etc. (Phillips & Smith, 2018). “People have these weird conceptions like we are the Beverly Hillbillies, fucking our cousins or our livestock. It's weird but it's a question you get asked if you come from a sheep town like mine.” A common link between these negative stereotypes was an aspect of agriculture. Multiple participants expressed rhetoric that distanced them from agriculture and in so distance themselves from the stereotypes of rural individuals. “I didn’t grow up on a farm. I’m not a hick or from some wealthy family that can live in a giant HGTV farmhouse on 20 acres. I grew up in the mountains. I spent more time on dirt bikes than playing with farm animals.” In some cases, the aspect of agriculture was so deeply intertwined with the stereotype that it was mentioned as a trait of disclosure. “People don’t really know because I don’t really show it off. I’m not out here wearing flannel and a cowboy hat. I’m not in the agriculture department.” This specific participant directly correlates being an agriculture student as being an identity defining trait that would disclose a rural identity to
others. The interesting aspect of the tie between rural and agriculture is that these students are hegemonically perpetuating many of the same stereotypes. They regard agriculture as bad or negative and want to distance themselves from this aspect. They use terms that have been historically damaging to rural and agricultural-based cultures. While they are actively fighting to separate their individual identity from the negative stereotype of being rural, they reinforce urbanormativity. It also may impact the way in which students negotiate their choice in majors. If the individual is experiencing some stereotype threat, they may avoid certain majors such as animal science or agriculture in order to distance themselves from the stereotype even if they have a passion for the subject (Fischer, 2010). A student may either completely reject the major or they may conceal their major from their peers in order to reduce the stereotype threat.

The act of concealing one’s identity is to consciously perform against the cultural capital from their place of origin and perform within urban cultural capital norms. Since cultural capital is based in the traditions, practices, norms and habits of a region these become the more external expressions of one’s identity. So, in order to conceal their rural identity students must maintain a dissonance with the cultural capital they perform for others on various levels from rhetorical choices to symbolic representations. This may show up on campus in the ways in which individuals interact with urban symbols such as parking garages, permitted spaces, untouchable nature, elevators, and technology. Rural students must navigate these symbols through replicating others on campus and
when they falter, they must cover the failure. Rhetorically students must navigate a way to express their hometowns without revealing it as something deserving investigation. Should they ignore the question it may spur further investigation so they need to find a concealment tactic in which they can convey an insignificant data point to their peers.

Concealment tactics can range from blatant fabrications to obfuscations when topics that are threatening arise (Helens-Hart, 2017). Rural individuals would state a nearby city as where they were from when asked by peers and instructors. “I don’t really tell people where exactly I am from. I normally choose the next big city over” or “It’s just easier to tell people a city close by instead of try to explain it all to them”. In both of these quotes there were no direct statements of wanting to make sure there was no association between the specific place and their identity. But one participant did explicitly state that they were performing explicit concealment of their town to keep it separated from their identity and the perceptions peers would have. “I say a city they know or have heard of and then they move on. I don’t want to be associated with my town so why clarify.” For some it was framed as a means to further reduce the likelihood of association with stereotypes or identification. Others portrayed this concealment tactic as a means to reduce the need for explanation. In one way it may be the reduction of more information to describe the area, or it may be that these students feel they would have to undergo more work to modify their reputation (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017). This can be seen replicated in
other areas of study, such as queer theory, where individuals who are transgender do not disclose because they do not wish to engage in the interrogation that traditionally follows (Dias, Rocha, Tateo and Marsico, 2021). Feelings may go beyond just exposure to the feeling of being overly examined by peers as if they are an object of study. Concealment can become a primary tool in order to avoid the over-exposure that may follow disclosure.

Stereotypes play a significant role in the concealment of identity. The fears of peer perceptions are intertwined with hegemonically embedded rural stereotypes (Phillips & Smith, 2018). While none of the participants described specific experiences in which peers on campus treated them differently upon learning their identity or discussing rural communities. Stereotype threat can help to explain why these individuals feel the need to conceal their identity through concealment specific tactics to reduce signs of their rural cultural capital (Fischer, 2010).

A more surprise aspect of cultural capital negotiation and stereotype threat in concealment was in regard to discussions of ethnicity. Since all the participants were Caucasian or white passing, they had a unique perspective that was brought up in a couple of interviews. “I am pretty much just your average white guy. As long as I don’t say anything they would never know.” In this quote, the participant states that the only aspect of their identity that would make them unusual, not average, is his rurality. Not only is that setting his rurality in a negative light but also acknowledges the ability to conceal it as cognitive. He states it as a part of his identity that he controls and dictates when it is released. But wrapping this in with the larger dialogue of fear around the rural
stereotype it is understandable why they would perform cognitive active concealment in order to pass as an “average white guy”. He sees the rural identity as pushing him out of the category of average but as long as it remains concealed, he can continue to pass. For those that identified as Caucasian they saw their rurality as the main feature of their difference and felt they could easily slide into a spot amongst their peers if that was kept concealed.

For those that were white-passing rural individuals, many stated a lack of comfortability around the topic. This may be a result of the interactions between the social and cultural capital within rural areas where some knowledge is essentially known and not needed to be blatantly expressed leading to limited habits and practices around it. “People call me white all the time and really, I just take after my mother’s complexion. I’m not really used to talking about it. People at home know my family but here it’s like when I speak Spanish people ask me so many questions.” Since rural individuals are not used to a large network in which one is consistently building new connections, they may have limited social scripts around the expressions of identity. This intertwining of social and cultural capital develops into limited practice or habits in which one’s ethnicity is outwardly expressed to stranger. While the strength of rural relationships is built on continual exposure where factors of identity are more familial than individual. These implications deserve further study in future research.

Capital Access and Conversion - Economic & Symbolic Capital

While reviewing the interviews of participants the entwinement of class and rurality became abundantly clear. These two aspects were so entwined that at many times it was
hard to tell if the individuals were discussing their lack of access to socioeconomic resources or to actual resources due to distance from cities. In aspects of capital, economic capital and symbolic capital can provide the most insight. While economic capital focuses on financial and symbolic representations of wealth the symbolic capital is what one can be gained through capital conversions. In many cases these two become intertwined as rural students hinted at the more, they wish to access.

Many talked about wanting more, that more was both a socioeconomic more but also a distinctly non-material more. “I want so much more than my parents had. They got up at the ass crack of dawn, worked all day busting their backs and had nothing. We had nothing and neither did anyone else. Everyone in town was broke and on drugs, that's all it has to offer. Losers and townies who will never be anything more. I won’t allow that to be me and that's why I came here, to make sure of that.” In this quote the individual hits multiple aspects of what they constitute as more, type of labor, socioeconomics, access to help, but more interesting than anything was this ability of movement. The aspect that these rural individuals would never be anything more, they would never have that more that the individual is looking for. By staying in the town, they have stagnated their ability to be and have more. By only having a rural form of capital they could never convert that capital into symbolic capital that held value in the urban society. While the more may be ambiguous in nature by contrast it is a less taxing form of labor, better physical and mental health, greater socioeconomic status, and beyond. The individual develops rurality as the barrier to more and that in itself is urbanormativity at work. That all the positive
things can be accessed if only the individual migrates both physically and mental to the urban habitus through assimilation.

The lack of access was also framed as how urban individuals discuss aspects of rural living with a lack of understanding of the lived experience. “People talk about being off the grid but it's not a vacation it's the life out there. Maybe one day I will have so much that having nothing feels like an exciting getaway but honestly it sucks”. This participant specifically frames it as being a space of privilege that they may attain through reaching that subjective more or better life. Participants repeated at multiple times that they had this upward trajectory for their lives. It was not specific to a financial movement but a connection to opportunities that were not typical of rural areas. They felt that by shifting their status, and in so their capital, from rural to urban, by graduating from the university, they gained access to a path that they were once closed off from. One individual felt that rural individuals had no real voice. That there was a lack of recognition of rural communities' value. “No one cares about rural people. They can have the brightest idea out there and no one cares. I love my hometown, but I can’t have that be my life. There are no rural people giving TED talks.”. This is an explicit conscious choice to separate from the rural culture and capital in order to obtain the ability to even participate in the public discourse. While power had been a backdrop to many discussions this participant had been very direct in illuminating specific connections to capital exchange. These individuals who wanted access to this amorphous subjective more may be truly trying to access power. While power in their minds may equate to financial growth or job accessibility the underlying layer was that to be anything of worth it had to
be urban. There may be implications that urbanormativity is at play in warping the
transaction of Bourdieu capital. It has essentially devalued any capital that is in a rural
form, taking away the ability to access symbolic capital without engaging in urban
normative structures.

While much of the previous literature has focused on the structures of
urbanormativity little has been done to highlight it within the narrative of rural
individuals and specifically its role for rural university students on campus experiences
(Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017). Many of these students already enter the arena of
the university with hegemonically urbanormatively based beliefs. The organization
becomes the space in which they can enact urbanormativity by concealing their identity
to attain access to urban capitals further reducing the value of rural capital. This research
has sought to bring together a variety of theoretical standpoints in order to create a larger
picture of the experience of rural university students.

These findings help build the scholarship on urbanormativity as a complex set of
power structures existing in both the urban and rural parts of society. These implications
drive the need for further research and insight into the ways in which these are developed
and enacted both in the lived experiences of individuals and structurally embedded within
the social system.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Rural university students have a variety of nuanced pressures that may impact their sense of belonging on the university campus. Vast scholarship has connected a sense of belonging as a crucial factor in individuals completing their degree (Quassoli & Dimitriadis, 2019). While rural students graduate from high school at a higher rate than their urban peers, they are far less likely to attend or complete a college degree. Sense of belonging may be playing a role in the differences in graduation rates for rural university students, specifically passing rural students. Through their ability to conceal an identity that is perceived as less favorable they experience a unique set of experiences.

The implications of this study bring together aspects of Bourdieu theories of capital and theories of concealment. Urbanormativity as an underlying power structure may be bankrupting the rural capital and influencing rural students to assimilate towards rural habitus in order to access any form of symbolic capital or power. Preconceived stereotypes seemed to play one of the more significant roles in the choosing to conceal one’s identity. The depth of stereotype threat could influence the continuation of concealment as the individual works to actively distance themselves from certain aspects of rural identity (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017). Universities are now becoming a space in which individuals coalesce their journey from youth to young adulthood. The university is responsible to practice self-reflexivity in this process and analyze their role in producing and reifying normative structures (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017).
Universities should start by analyzing their initial interactions with rural students by evaluating the rhetoric when they are recruiting and giving orientations to new students. Specific rhetoric of removal from the rural space only seeks to reify the disconnection from their place of origin (Baker, Brown, & Williams, 2014). “Everyone tells me I should get out since I’m the smart one.” A notion of getting out was continuous and hegemonic in its framing of rurality as failure. This notion is perpetuated by the university with its lack of discussion around rural job opportunities, positive narratives of rural spaces/people and its emphasis on the ways in which rural cultures are failing (Nelson, 2018). In initial interactions with students during orientations there can be an integration of the acknowledgement that for rural students the urban symbols may be overwhelming. From the tall buildings to parking meters there cannot be an assumption that these individuals understand them but also that they are not made to feel like outsiders in their interactions with these urban symbols.

The university serves as a space in which individuals can enact that urbanormativity to the highest degree by assimilating to the urbanormative structure. Universities should seek to implement aspects of rurality into their structural makeup. Group pathways are one option that is occurring in other areas in the world in which certain majors spend a majority of their classes with the exact same students, essentially creating a smaller cohort based on the depth of relationship instead of breadth (Pruitt & Vanegas, 2019). These cohorts have a specific faculty member or members who oversee and serve as counselors to the group. In many ways these group pathways seek to develop a scenario within the already constructed higher education systems that increases the value of the rural habitus. Instead of rural students entering the higher education system from a space of deficit they will have the habitus to develop social and cultural capital. By doing this it not only promotes the value of a rural social capital, reducing loneliness,
but it could also impact the notion that aloneness is a rite of passage to succeed after graduation. For the university these adjustments will allow for more diverse skill sets to be developed by students while increasing the retention of rural students (Greaves, Kelestyn, Blackburn, & Kitson, 2022).

While this research sought to better understand the rural student experience the ultimate goal is to expand literature on diversity and inclusion among higher education. By creating diverse teaching methods and structures higher education systems can become more inclusive beyond just rural students. International students, black students, non-able-bodied students, have all been shown to excel at greater rates when there is variation in teaching methods and structures on campus (Greaves, Kelestyn, Blackburn, & Kitson, 2022). By making small adjustments to the normative structures of higher education, inclusion can be increased, and a more diverse set of individuals can attain academic achievement.

Limitations & Future Research

This study only contained 9 participants, and this is a primary limitation. As the rural population only makes up 18% of the entire United States population (Nelson, 2018), and an even smaller make-up of the population on university campuses participants are limited but in the future an expansion of this work is recommended to better understand a more generalizable narrative.

It is also important that while this study focused on white-passing rural university students that this expanded to include a variety of ethnic backgrounds. By expanding the focus to include greater variety one may be able to find patterns of communication in the lived experiences and narratives that provide further insight. In future research it is also notable to find spaces in which
the individuals did find sense of belonging. While this study focused on first-year university students by studying students in their last year, research may be able to find areas in which rural individuals were able to establish a sense of belonging over time.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Interview Questions

University Experience
Can you think of a time when you felt you didn’t belong amongst your peers on campus?
Can you think of a time when you felt that your rural identity was part of a conversation on campus?
Do you feel that your peers on campus have similar shared experiences or background as your own?

Do you have any examples you can think of that made you feel the way you do?
Do you feel that your instructors on campus have similar shared experiences or background as your own?

Do you have any examples you can think of that made you feel the way you do?
What would you describe as the greatest benefits of your connections to university members (peers, educators, administrators)?

Future benefits?

Rural High School Experience
Can you think of a time when you felt you didn’t belong amongst your peers in high school?
Can you think of a time when you felt that your rural identity influenced your success as a student?
Do you feel that your instructors in high school had similar shared experiences or background as your own?
Do you have any examples you can think of that made you feel the way you do?

Do you feel that your instructors in high school had similar shared experiences or background as your own?

Do you have any examples you can think of that made you feel the way you do?

What would you describe as the greatest benefits of your connections to members from your rural high school (peers, educators, administrators)?

Future benefits?