

Is “rural” a four-letter word?: Implication of diversity in rural Canada

Those who worry about four-letter words don't always realize that there are two types. One type is the traditional swearword. The other type, far more dangerous, is the word that misclassifies reality by lumping together things that are quite different. Alessandro Alasia's just-released (March 2004) Statistics Canada publication entitled “Mapping the socio-economic diversity of rural Canada” (Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin, Vol. 5, No. 2) is really saying that “rural” is a four-letter word of the misclassification type.



Alasia's article uses a method called factor analysis that summarizes 27 important indicator variables for the 288 census divisions (CDs) in Canada. He shows that just six different measures are needed to capture 78% of the differences between the CDs. To see how complicated that makes our beloved country, imagine that there were only two possible values for each dimension. With only two possibilities for each of six dimensions, we would have $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 64$ different types of CD. In other words, “rural” misclassifies a hugely complicated reality.

That's what our New Rural Economy project has been saying about rural Canada for years. Dr. William Reimer's recent (March 2004) publication entitled “Exploring Diversity in Rural Canada” (in Measuring Rural Diversity, Vol. 1, No. 2) describes four dimensions that differentiate 4,882 rural census subdivisions (CSDs). These four dimensions can be represented by answers to four questions. Is the CSD integrated into the global economy? Does the local economy fluctuate? Is the CSD adjacent to a major urban centre? Does the CSD have high levels of social services? Add in the outcome variable of economic success and we have the five categorizations of the NRE Rural Observatory's 32 types of rural CSD.

Remember the number six. That's what's really important in the Alasia article. Statistical techies will worry about his untransformed percentage variables, his small sample size, and his use of orthogonal rotation. They'd certainly question his specification and labeling of individual dimensions, but even techies would trust his number six.

Six Alasia dimensions (of CDs) and five Reimer dimensions (of CSDs) show that there's certainly



not one rural Canada. (Actually, a very exciting project would be to find out how much of the variation in CSDs is actually caused by CD variation). With so many rurals, why have a Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin and why have a New Rural Economy project? Shouldn't there be 64 or 32 different bulletins or projects?



But where, I ask you, are the money and the power and the media moguls and the work-week homes of MPs and MPPs? All in metropolitan areas! NAC and LEAF lobby for women; the CLC and the NDP lobby for the working class (or at least the unionized part of it); premiers meet to lobby for provinces; big-city mayors meet to lobby for big cities. Who is lobbying for rural areas?

Rural Canada, just because it is so diverse, needs spokespeople and spokesorganizations. So even if “rural” is scientifically a four-letter word, let's use it anyway. That'll help us combine forces to support the many different Canadian rurals.

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