

## Book Review

Wuthnow, R. (2013). *Small-town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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Robert Wuthnow’s *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* is an easy read that belies the importance and complexity of its content. From the start of this book, Wuthnow lays out contrasts in perspective of current and historic issues that shape small towns in the United States. He offers an inside perspective on small and rural communities, with a craft for framing questions clearly, and even provocatively.

Wuthnow uses the term “small town” more prominently than “rural,” focusing on community size rather than geographic proximity to urban centers. However, rural researchers recognize that small size is a key component of the nature and definition of rural communities, along with locale. The author directly contrasts the characteristics of small towns with those of urban centers and uses the term “rural” alongside “small towns.” The reader quickly realizes that *Small-Town America* is describing the places and issues that represent what rural education researchers recognize as “rural.”

### Style, Balance, and Perspective

*Small-Town America* begins with an overview that provides a broad sense of the range of places labeled as “small towns.” Wuthnow then examines conditions that exist in small and rural towns and impact rural education—but are rarely discussed when the focus is on schools. This book broadens the reader’s view to a host of sociological and cultural issues that exist in some form, *albeit* to greater and lesser degrees, in most rural places.

Wuthnow makes note of the change and adaptation that has occurred in small communities in response to political, social, and economic shifts. He describes changes in traditional jobs and community roles, such as the rural

county extension agent moving from predominantly being an agricultural and farming advisor to serving as a consultant for non-farming residents about lawns and gardens and educating the community at large about pesticides. Though Wuthnow focuses on his own particular case examples, it is in such a compelling way that we cannot help but reflect on how those characteristics play out in the rural places we know.

### Research and Sources

The core of information in *Small-Town America* is based on Wuthnow’s own qualitative research data, which he has collected from interviews with 700 people in 300 towns in 43 states, including leaders and ordinary residents. He has compared these data to similar and related research in cities and suburbs. He primarily presents those data as case examples to illustrate the themes and trends on which he focuses in the book chapters. Wuthnow does not limit himself to presenting his own research, however. Rather, he undergirds his data and patterns of findings with a rich layer of diverse sources.

*Small-Town America* includes quite a few national and regional statistics on rural communities, but they are well-contextualized and palatable, rather than dry and abstract or tedious and disconnected. Wuthnow notes that while in recent years there has been an overall increase in research on rural places, this corpus is still insignificant compared to the explosion of urban-focused research published.

Having acknowledged the rural research gap, Wuthnow provides various lenses for understanding the profiles of rural and small town where these interviews occurred, using data sources such as the National Center for Educational Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and multiple forms of U.S. Census data. He also provides theoretical grounding in anthropology, and in social and community theory, with contemporaries such as Sherry Ortner (2006) and more foundational authors like David Hummon (1990). Wuthnow proffers context for rural education with documentation of useful patterns in business and sociology of rural areas, including residents’ ages, life

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phases, and reasons for being and living rural. The narratives acknowledge and illustrate conditions of the working poor in rural America, such as their earning low hourly wages, even when compared to other rural residents and given the state of their local rural economies. These cases paint a landscape sure to resonate with researchers and educators familiar with rural places.

### **Content and Organization**

The themes that constitute chapter topics in *Small-Town America* are familiar issues to rural researchers, as well as key issues that need to be raised for new arrivals to rural scholarship. The author weaves in just enough sociological theory and research to ground the rural discussion and move it forward, but not so much that it becomes distracting or overly complex. The earlier chapters of the book focus more on past and present characteristics of rural society and culture, similar to Osha Gray Davidson's *Broken Heartland* (1996), while latter chapters take on religion and morality, along with politics, like Jane Adams' *Fighting for the Farm* (2003). Consistent with its title, the final two chapters are future-oriented, tying together those myriad ideas with perspective on what they mean for rural America into the future. Unlike many single-author books, *Small-Town America's* topical chapters are written independently enough that some of them can be used separately and understood apart from the rest of the book. This feature makes it a relatively efficient resource for learning about particular aspects of rural community.

*Small-Town America* presents, with sensitivity and balance, synthesis and integration of many complex rural issues. Wuthnow links characteristics such as rural residency, industry, and professions to rural values and culture, as well as to economics. He acknowledges the prevalence of rural pragmatism, utilitarianism, and community service in values that drive many choices. For example, he notes that healthcare jobs and professions are often held by rural residents, given their deep traditional service values, common among those with rural roots. Similarly, he notes that some people are rural by default (birth, family responsibilities, lack of education), but others are rural by choice (religious or cultural values or lifestyle preference), and examines the motives that promote both rural immigration and out-migration. This book gives us a glimpse of what retirement looks like in rural places, and how adult education and senior wellness may need to be managed differently in rural communities.

Wuthnow describes the balance of rural residency and connectedness with needs that have become depleted in many rural communities. His interview-based cases represent themes among the voices in his 700 interviews. They illustrate the progressive dynamics that typify social change across many rural places. These rural residents'

stories paint pictures like that of diminishing local rural merchants and home-grown service industries diminishing, while many residents drive to the closest larger communities to shop or increasingly shop online. While manufacturing plants founded and built by local people may remain in rural U.S. settings, some are now owned by large overseas corporations. These complex changes in the nature and culture of life and business in rural America are vividly illustrated by the case stories told in *Small-Town America*.

This book is not all about education and does not focus on schools and classrooms, so it provides a broader view than some books on rural education. At the same time, implications for rural education are woven throughout the chapters. *Small-Town America* emphasizes and illustrates vividly that education is one of the most important dividing characteristics for personal success and higher social status among small-town residents. It also illuminates the deeply-embedded value of contributing to community that characterizes rural residents with high social status—not conspicuous consumption, but rather volunteering and supporting the community.

### **Recommended Use**

*Small-Town America* would be an appropriate text for both undergraduate and graduate students. This book (or selections from it) could be used in a wide range of courses, such as sociology of education, an introduction to rural research, or rural context and culture of education. Since the topical chapters can stand alone, it offers potential short readings for a wide range of courses in education as well as other disciplines.

Beyond courses, it would be particularly useful to share some of its key points with preservice teaching students or future school administrators headed for field experiences or practica in rural schools and communities. Reading some or all of *Small-Town America* would be helpful to any student contemplating a thesis or dissertation project in rural education. This book also offers rich foundational material for researchers and practitioners writing rural education grants.

### **Intellectual Contribution**

Robert Wuthnow's *Small Town America* packs plenty of information into case-based stories supported by contextual data and grounded in theory from anthropology and sociology. It contributes to the current rural literature in its broad view, taking in the larger dynamic of rural community and society that we sometimes miss, or see only glimpses of, in books that focus more specifically on rural education. It presents voices that complement and illuminate hard data, and a broad-based confirmatory qualitative data set (43 U.S. states) adding perspective on needs in the social

and community contexts of rural education's concerns and issues.

*Small Town America* echoes some change trends like those in Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011) but frames them in the rural context, making them relevant to rural educators and researchers. Wuthnow expands on the rural dimensions of some regional differences presented in Paul Boyer's *Building Community* (2006), and his stories of rural people resonate with some of the style of Davidson's stories of rural places in *Broken Heartland* (1996) but update readers' perspective two decades later.

If, as a rural education advocate you seek rural voices for rural issues but do not have that systematic data in hand, those voices may be captured in Wuthnow's work. If, as a rural education researcher, you have ever said, "I know the literature says 'x' about rural places, but I cannot pull up a citation for it," the source you need may be cited in *Small-Town America*.

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