RURAL SOCIAL WORK

An international perspective

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Contents

Acknowledgements iv
Introduction v

Part One: The experience of rurality

one Contexts of practice 3
two The social dynamics of small communities 27
three Indigenous peoples: dispossession, colonisation and discrimination 47
four The experience of other minorities 75
five Problems and possibilities in rural practice 99

Part Two: Developing rural practice

six Models for practice 1: personal social services 123
seven Models for practice 2: community social work 151
eight Workforce issues 177

Conclusion 195
References 199
Index 245

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Introduction

Most texts on rural social work are written with a particular national context in mind and rarely address an international readership, though, of course, they may provide valuable information and ideas that can be adapted to other settings. In contrast, this book draws upon a wider range of international research, theory and practice in rural social work with the aims of:

- establishing the diversity of rural practice contexts;
- disseminating information about interventions and models of practice in rural areas;
- promoting the development and inclusion of rural perspectives in practice for the education, recruitment and deployment of rural workers.

Some aspects of rural practice have been well researched but there are areas where we lack empirical evidence and instead have to rely upon theoretical speculation, descriptive accounts of practice and our own personal observations. Accordingly, it is also our intention to point up areas for future research and development.

This book is primarily written for those who practise and teach social work in what might be called 'European-influenced' systems of social service in predominantly industrial capitalist societies. That is, the forms of social work found in Australia, Canada, the UK, the US and most of the countries of Western Europe: countries where there is a history of state and voluntary provision for personal social services and where there are well-established traditions of professional social work education. These countries tend to have highly urbanised populations clustered around large cities and towns. While the most distant and remote rural areas may have suffered population decline, in many of these countries substantial numbers remain living in rural areas. In some countries there is evidence of counter-urbanisation as increasingly affluent workers move into the more accessible rural districts surrounding towns and cities. The United States of America provides a striking example of the paradox of urbanisation and overall population growth. The US Census Bureau (2000a) has estimated that while around 78% of the population live in urban metropolitan areas, the remaining 22%, a surprising 55 million people, still live in rural districts (Daley and Avant, 2004). So while the proportion of the total population living in rural areas may have declined considerably

since 1900, the actual numbers living there have more than doubled (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005).

While some parts of this text may have relevance for practice in other countries such as Brazil or India, in many places the most pressing welfare priorities for rural populations require interventions directed towards more fundamental needs: for clean water, satisfactory housing, basic health care and education. While religious organisations may provide some rudimentary services in the countryside, formal social service provision is typically scarce or non-existent, and most people rely primarily upon their family and immediate community for support when needed. In such countries, the primary goals for social action and welfare development may be targeted at the broader community, but, as this book will make clear, we do not think that it is necessary to make a rigid distinction between social programmes and community development aimed at larger groups and populations, and personal social services geared towards the particular needs and problems of individuals and families. Indeed, a key proposition of this book is that this division, which is most evident in the UK, and can also been seen in Australia, Canada and the US, can obstruct effective intervention in rural problems.

At the outset, we acknowledge that the idea that there is something that can be described as rural social work is not one that is universally accepted or recognised. There is a well-established tradition of rural social work in the US and the term is widely recognised in Australia and Canada, but in the UK and on the European mainland it is much less commonly used to describe a specific area of practice. This is largely because the demands and problems of rural practice remain under-recognised, but it is also a consequence of a number of other factors. Levels of urbanisation and population density are much higher in many European countries, and so the needs of rural populations may be socially and politically marginalised. The fact that the majority of social work teaching and research is located in urban institutions may also contribute to under-recognition, while in some countries the prevailing systems of social intervention do not recognise social work as a distinctive welfare profession in the first place (Schilde and Schulte, 2005).

We begin this book with the notion of rural social work as a descriptive term. That is, one that simply identifies the location and context of social work practice in rural areas. From a descriptive point of view, the term 'rural social work' has as much utility as, say, describing work with children and their carers as child and family social work. For us, the term 'rural social work' does not mean that all problems and situations in rural places are the same. We do not suppose that rural problems can be addressed with one set of methods and approaches, and we certainly do not propose any overall theory about doing rural social work. Indeed, a central theme of this book is that rural communities are diverse and the ways in which personal and social problems are experienced by rural dwellers can vary from one place to another, and, consequently, may require different responses according to the particular contexts in which they have arisen. As Fluharty (2002) memorably commented some years ago, 'If you've seen one rural community you've seen ... one rural community' (cited in Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005, p xxii). Nevertheless, we think the term rural social work has merit in directing attention to some key questions about how social work is practised in non-urban areas. For example, is the practice of social workers in rural areas distinctively different from that in urban areas, and, if not, should it be?

Our experience from practice and research is that social workers in rural areas often find that their professional training has not adequately prepared them for the challenges they face. For example, most discussions on professional confidentiality are premised upon the assumption that social workers typically work in formalised one-to-one situations in urban areas and are unlikely to have any other social contact with service users. In urban areas, the size of the local community and the density of population usually make it relatively easy to establish and maintain confidentiality. In contrast, a woman in a rural area who is subject to violence from her male partner cannot simply walk into a women's aid centre in a small rural town without wondering whether her visit will be observed by someone who knows her, and who might make assumptions about why she is going there. This is not simply an issue about her desire for privacy, but one that may bear directly upon her safety, as a visit might have very risky consequences if it became known to her abusive partner. The point is that the risk of further violence may be exacerbated by the lack of anonymity in a small community, yet few social work programmes devote more than cursory attention to some of the specifics of rural practice.

If social work policies, practices and training are premised upon the unwitting and unrecognised assumption of an urban setting, then the result will be that some of the factors that bear upon service provision and upon personal and social problems in rural areas will be neglected. Our concern is that while there are some excellent examples of professional preparation around the world, in general most social work students will receive little, if any, specific preparation for rural practice. Consequently, they may arrive in rural posts with little knowledge of

the existing literature and research and be poorly prepared for their practice (Locke, 1991). In the absence of well-founded knowledge, they may feel that they are 'making it up as they go along' (Cheers, 1998).

Problems of definition

Most texts on rural social work attempt to get to grips with the question of what is meant by rural social work, and there are two approaches that can be taken to this. The first approach, and the one that is most commonly encountered, is to attempt to define what 'rurality' is. That is, to define the rural place or setting. The second approach is to attempt to define the field of practice. That is, to establish what, if anything, is distinctive about rural social work.

Defining rurality

This approach, which has been widely used in rural sociology and rural policy, typically attempts to establish a definition of rurality based upon a single demographic criterion such as population density, the size of rural settlements, their geographical location or the time that it takes rural dwellers to travel to work or access public services. Mono-dimensional definitions, which are widely used by government agencies and researchers, may draw upon existing data sets to map relationships between particular demographic features and data on a range of social indexes of health, welfare, income, crime, educational attainment, employment and so on. Certainly, it seems a reasonable contention to suggest that some aspects of social work practice in the remoter Scottish islands may be rather different from those in a large city like Glasgow, or that workers practising in the northern areas of Canada, where there are few roads and where travel may necessitate lengthy journeys or even air travel, face some different issues than those working in a metropolitan area like Toronto. The advantages of using a single clear criterion seem obvious. It appears to allow clear generalisations and statements to be made about rural places, rural problems and potential solutions. There are also what might be termed residual definitions, such as the one formerly used by the US Census Bureau (2000a) (see also www.nysdot.gov/divisions/policy-and-strategy/darb/dai-unit/ttss/repository/ua_2k.pdf and www.rupri.org/dataresearchviewer.php?id=38 or www.census.org), where rural is everything that is not otherwise defined as urban or metropolitan.

There are extensive technical debates about the merits of different sorts of definition and some writers have also attempted to distinguish

between rural and remote areas. They contend that remote areas tend to have distinctively different characteristics because of their distant locations. However, little evidence is adduced to show that there are sustained and consistent differences between remote rural districts and other rural areas. Nevertheless, there may be merit in descriptively signalling the facts of distance and isolation and their potential impact upon the context of practice with the term 'remote'. For instance, although we are not persuaded that a conclusive definition is necessary or possible, it is important to recognise that in remote areas with small populations lone or solo working may be commonplace as social work teams may be small or non-existent, and that as a result social workers may be more likely to practise in a generic or generalist manner.

There are several drawbacks, with these sorts of mono-dimensional definitions, the most obvious being the validity of the definition used. For example, when the size of the community is used, there can be highly contentious debates about what size counts as a rural community, should it be 2,500 or 10,000 or maybe even 20,000 people? While a community of 2,500 might be termed a rural village in a UK context, because it may be located only a few miles away from another community or even a larger town, it may lack many of the facilities one might find in a similar-sized community in say rural Australia or Canada. A further difficulty is that while each definition may capture one aspect of rurality very well, each one ignores other dimensions that may be more significant in particular situations. Thus, a definition based upon geographical remoteness would not take into account the size of a community or the opportunities for regular employment, yet it may be these features of a particular village or small town that impact most upon the life chances and the problems faced by its inhabitants. Furthermore, the experience of life in such places may differ greatly according to the prevailing political climate in terms of the degree of economic and social support given to a particular community. Unsurprisingly, some writers on rurality often conclude that the existing definitions are inadequate and that perhaps a 'compound definition' (Halfacree, 1993), maybe one that combines two or more of these criteria, should be established (Olaveson et al, 2004). One example of a compound definition reported by Olaveson and her colleagues is that of Cleland (1995) who devised a complex index for the US that measured rurality on 11 dimensions and arrived at an overall rating from zero (least rural) to 19 (most rural). However, they noted that when 'applied to each state, it creates an unusual measure of degree of rurality for some states ... Wyoming the most sparsely populated state, scores a 3' (Olaveson et al, 2004, p 15). Of course, it is possible that an index like this would

be much more representative of people's perceptions of rurality if it were applied to somewhat smaller areas.

Another difficulty in attempting to establish mutually exclusive definitions that allow clear-cut statements about whether an area is either rural or urban is that such either/or categorisations do not capture the complexity and variability of rural communities. We agree with Ginsberg, who in reference to the work of Coward et al (1994), contended that 'scholarship on rural areas is sometimes impeded by efforts to create dichotomies as ways of understanding the differences between rural and nonrural areas' (1998, p 6). In our view, attempts at definitive demarcation are unhelpful because they presuppose that there is some enduring essential or intrinsic feature of 'rurality' that can be found in all rural communities. Whereas, as we will argue throughout this book, the diversity of rural areas, together with the crucial importance of how variably people may subjectively experience the place and their position within the community, makes such suppositions difficult to sustain. Attempts at definitive categorisation, which presume that there are some homogeneous features of rural life invariably signalled by the distinction, are often contradicted by the direct and detailed knowledge that social workers gain from working with diverse individuals and groups, people whose position within their communities may not be easily subsumed under the broader definition. Furthermore, policies and practices based upon assumptions of sameness/similarity can lead to inappropriate provision that neglects the needs of some people, especially those from minority groups.

Implicit in many definitions is the idea that something changes about the way communities work and how people live within them as one moves across the definitional boundary marker. Thus, the marker of size or distance is also regarded as a reliable indicator of social characteristics. While we may have subjectively experienced such changes, there are considerable difficulties in deciding objectively where precisely to draw the lines of definition in terms of size or distance. It seems presumptuous to try to 'fix' rurality in these ways without clear evidence that the dynamics of rural life vary reliably as one moves to a larger or smaller place, or nearer or further away from a large centre of population.

Our view is not that definitions are irrelevant or unimportant. Indeed, they may be extremely significant when politicians, government and funding bodies are making decisions about resources and service priorities. Our reservation is that not only do they tend to aggregate some very variable aspects of rurality, but they also direct attention away from other fundamentally important aspects of rural life. Therefore,

we are appreciative of Martinez-Brawley's attempt to 'transcend the classic debate' (2000, p xx) about defining rurality, which led her to use, instead, the term 'small communities'. We also wish to move beyond a discussion of the demographics of rural life into a broader appreciation of the social dynamics of rural life. Nonetheless, we think that rural workers should familiarise themselves with the sorts of definitional criteria that are being used in their localities, if only to challenge and problematise them.

Defining the practice

The second approach is much less common and is often not explicitly stated in terms of a definitional issue, but it centres on the question: 'In what ways is rural social work different from urban practice?' Locke and Winship (2005) suggest that there are five recurrent and significant themes in the literature on rural practice:

- Generalist practice – that is, being 'skilled in working with individuals, families, small groups, organizations and communities' (Locke and Winship, 2005, p 6).
- Community development – they note that as early as 1933 Josephine Brown was calling for rural workers to embrace both casework and community work.
- External relations – that is, relations with significant people outside of the immediate issue, such as local politicians and other influential actors.
- Cultural influences – sensitivity to the particularities of local rural cultures as well as to the needs of minority groups.
- Desirable characteristics of workers – these include a visible commitment to the local community and the capacity to work without much professional support.

In contrast to this thematic approach there have been a number of empirical studies in Australia and the US that have tried to establish whether rural work is different. Some have compared rural practice with that employed in urban areas and have generally concluded that there is little difference between rural and urban practice (Grant, 1984; Whitaker, 1986; Puckett and Frederico, 1992; York et al, 1998). Nonetheless, because most of these studies have predominantly focused upon existing patterns of service provision rather than upon the existence of, or need for, particular skills, they are unlikely to show significant differences. Indeed, as we have noted elsewhere:

> Descriptive comparative studies such as these are unlikely to show major rural–urban differences because they are based upon current work practices which are largely determined by prevailing social care structures, practitioners' world views, and paradigms emphasised in mainstream professional literature and education programs.... Descriptive studies miss the heart of the matter ... they treat practitioners as if they float free of their social contexts. This may work for much of urban practice where practitioners spend their working hours dealing with people who they will never come across in other roles. But the assumption does not hold where they live in the same small community as their clients. Social care practice is not merely influenced by the rural context – practice and practitioners are integral parts of that context. (Cheers,1998, p 220)

The problem may be that existing studies have looked at the wrong sorts of things (Locke, 1991). Unsurprisingly, studies into the ways in which services are provided in rural areas tend to find service patterns that replicate the assumptions and structures found elsewhere in social work practice. Perhaps more attention should be paid to what individual social workers actually do, but as even their daily practices are likely to reflect broader organisational factors, this approach may not prove distinctive either. Interestingly, a non-comparative study by Gumpert et al (2000, cited in Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005) found that most rural workers thought that there were some distinctive characteristics of rural communities that impacted on their work. The features they noted included extensive networks of local knowledge, a suspicion of outsiders and a slower pace of work with clients.

We need to develop our knowledge of the ways in which rural workers may modify their practice or manage other more personal aspects of their lives. Thus, the second point in this quotation about social context is crucial, for it is this aspect of rural work that seems to be most significant in identifying what might be different about rural practice. It raises a number of interesting questions about how rural workers, especially those who live and work in the same place, manage issues about confidentiality, personal safety, their work and their social lives, and how they relate to the wider community as well as how it relates to them.

There may be few, if any, social work skills that are unique to rural contexts, but we think that there are reasonable grounds for supposing that workers may need to apply their skills differently and to do so

with knowledge of the social dynamics of rural communities. The most obvious feature of these dynamics is the more personalised basis of formal relationships in rural areas and the need to be aware of the wide social networks that exist in small communities. In many small communities, it is often possible to know most other people within them, either directly or indirectly, and this creates some fascinating dilemmas for workers and clients who may find it difficult to keep a clear separation between their professional role and their personal life. However, even these dynamics are not exclusive as they may also occur in some urban areas. For instance, neighbourhood workers, especially those working in encapsulated areas like public housing projects or districts that are partially isolated from the larger urban area by virtue of their geographical location, perhaps separated by a river or railway line, have reported similar dilemmas. Furthermore, when such issues do arise in urban practice they may not be fully recognised, reported or researched.

The second important point to note is that while studies that have specifically sought to examine possible differences between urban and rural practice have not found conclusive differences, this may well be the result of looking simply at the services that are provided rather than asking whether these are what is required. That is, if urbanist assumptions about service provision are simply enacted in the design and planning of rural services, it is not surprising that empirical investigation reveals few differences. The question might be better framed as not 'In what way are services different?', but rather 'To what extent should they be different?' (Cheers, 1998).

To summarise, our position is that rural social work is a term that usefully identifies a set of issues and concerns around social work practice in non-urban areas. However, it does not identify an exclusive set of characteristics that can only be found in rural areas, though we do think that there are some features that are more commonly encountered there. Practical experience of rural social work encourages practitioners to look again at questions of context, and it is this appreciation of the social dimensions of local practice that is often more consciously acknowledged than is the case in urban practice. Indeed, rural social work has an important role in reminding 'mainstream' practice of something that is often overlooked, but always remains evident to those who work in rural areas: specifically, that social context and the dynamics of communities matter. Ultimately, the sorts of questions and issues that interest rural practitioners also have relevance for social work practice in other locations.

Appreciating rural contexts and rural problems

We have already noted that one difficulty with the attempts to define rural is that they tend to assume some enduring or essential features of rurality that may not actually exist. Thus, all writers on rurality are faced with the question of how to write about some of the more common features of rural life without presenting these things as if they were universal characteristics. While most social work texts on rurality acknowledge some of the technical problems of definition, and clearly recognise the political and service consequences that can follow from different sorts of definition, they do not seem to recognise the sociological significance of this problem of definition. This 'slipperiness' of definition is a direct consequence of the fact that there are many different ways of understanding and representing rurality and these ways of seeing and understanding the countryside do not solely arise from objective and empirical 'facts'. Indeed, Murdoch and Pratt have warned that 'we should be extremely wary of attempts to definitively define the rural ... [because any definition] is saturated with assumptions and presuppositions' (1997, p 56). The point is that all definitions are socially constructed and so will vary according to the perceptions and positions of those who construct them.

It is crucial that social workers recognise that the ideas we have about the countryside may be shaped and influenced by a wide range of assumptions and even idealisations about rurality. Some of these ideas may have a long history. For example, when Marx and Engels in the 1870s (1972) saw the countryside as a place of oppression, ignorance and poverty and, consequently, welcomed the urbanising effects of capitalism, they were not alone in representing rural life as being backward, basic and uncultured. Indeed, the assumption of the superiority of city life is still evident in the contemporary usage of the words 'urbane' and 'rustic', which imply that those who live in rural areas have somehow been left behind and are socially isolated from the wider society. In many industrialised countries there may be ambiguous or even conflicting ideas of rurality and rural life. In an earlier text we noted that:

> there are multiple idealisations within countries as well as considerable variations between different countries. In much of Europe the countryside is often seen as a largely unchanged and unchanging place, an unspoiled pastoral landscape dotted with quiet rural communities. A place of family origin before urbanisation ... [and] more recently with the growth in disposable incomes and leisure time ... as an urban playspace.... What seems to be less common in Europe and more widespread in popular culture in North America is the representation of rurality in terms of notions of ruggedness, individuality and pioneering spirit.... Thus, the idealised historical representation is not so much a picture of the countryside as a place of origin, of peace and stability, but is one featuring the hardships and hazards endured, and of nature tamed. (Pugh, 2001, p 44)

Different sorts of representations of rurality are important because they may have a wider significance in terms of ideas about how the countryside should be used, about who lives there and about how rural life should be lived. These ideas can have a powerful symbolic and political significance and may be used to make statements about identity and nationality. For example, Sibley has pointed out that in England the countryside is seen by some people as having a 'sacred' quality that is the essence or heart of Englishness, a quality that at various times is seen as being threatened and 'endangered by the transgressions of discrepant minorities' (1997, p 219) such as the urban working class, gypsies, migrant workers and so on. Writing about the sorts of assumptions that are made about First Nation communities in Canada, Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie make the point that:

> Aboriginal communities are too often viewed as the romanticized last bastions of 'noble savages' or as deeply impoverished, highly dysfunctional entities in desperate need of the benevolent aid of outsiders. These extremes deny and distort reality. (Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie, 2005, p 228)

The point is that idealisations do not accurately represent social realities. When idealisations are used to promote a sense of belonging or nationality, or even when it is assumed that rural communities are essentially groupings of similar people, or at least groupings who share a common worldview and common norms, it is less likely that other aspects of social differentiation will be recognised and appreciated. In fact, the apparent homogeneity of rural communities is often contrasted with the more obvious diversity of urban areas to make a point about social cohesiveness. One result is that the recognition of forms of discrimination, such as racism and homophobia, is much less likely to occur if idealisations of rural communities ignore these forms of social

difference in the first place. Furthermore, the comparative 'invisibility' of some problems among dispersed and remote communities, such as family violence, poverty and drugs, may lead to the conclusion that these problems are largely urban issues. Clearly, if people's perceptions are that there are no black or other ethnic minorities living locally, or, alternatively, no violent abusers or substance misusers, then it follows for many of them that there cannot be a local need or local problem.

So, to return to the point about what sorts of generalisations we might be able to make about rurality in relation to rural social work, without assuming that these things are universally the case, there are six features that have been widely noted in the rural literature:

- the existence and needs of some rural dwellers tend to be unrecognised or are understated;
- rural populations are typically under-served by welfare services;
- rural infrastructures are weaker, that is the availability or presence of other services such as affordable housing, effective transport systems and so on is reduced;
- employment opportunities are restricted, either because of the rural location and/or the changing rural labour market;
- poverty and poorer life chances are more common in the most rural areas;
- rural services generally cost much more to deliver.

Much of the literature makes the point that rural problems are often similar to those found in urban areas but notes that these problems may be experienced differently because of the rural location. For instance, Rollinson and Pardeck in a review of rural homelessness in the US (2006) noted that family violence appeared to be much more commonly reported in rural than urban homelessness. Many of these features interact with each other, and it is often the case that problems in rural areas are exacerbated by the fact that rural dwellers may have fewer public and private resources available to deal with their problems. Unsurprisingly, rural people often appear to have relatively low expectations of welfare services in the first place. Additionally, some individuals and groups may experience systematic neglect, while others suffer from institutionalised racism in their contacts with human service agencies.

Throughout this book we wish to persuade readers of the complexity and variability of lived experience and so avoid making any simplistic assumptions about what other people's lives are like. As we shall see later, for example, being black or gay in the countryside may well be experienced as being an exposed and risky position, but we should not assume that this is so for all those who may be thus identified. The dynamics of small communities, which can certainly heighten feelings of isolation and vulnerability, can also permit different and more positive sorts of local response and adaptation. Moreover, the political context within which rurality is constructed can also have a significant bearing on how the wider society responds to rural problems. For example, in countries where urbanisation is a more recent phenomenon and where many people have more recent rural origins there may be a much more sympathetic appreciation of the needs of rural communities and their people. Seen in this more sociological way, the rural context in which rural social work is undertaken becomes a fascinating place. The countryside, far from being a separate dimension of social life, can be seen to have a complex relationship with the wider society. Most important, it helps us to understand how the idealisation of the 'rural' impacts upon our perceptions of social problems, upon our ideas of who 'belongs' in the countryside and, ultimately, upon whose needs are recognised.

The content and structure of the book

Three core themes run throughout this book. The first is the recognition of the diversity of rural contexts and rural lives. The second theme is the contention that successful rural practice requires a sound appreciation of local context. The third theme is that this diversity plus the contextual knowledge of particular places and communities logically leads to a rejection of any 'one size fits all' solution. Thus, not only do we reject the implicit urbanist assumptions that underpin some approaches to practice, but we also contend that no rigid distinction in practice should be made between personal social services and more community-focused interventions. Although welfare services in some countries may organisationally distinguish between the two broad approaches to practice, we think that this is an unhelpful separation which unnecessarily restricts the range of possible interventions.

This book is divided into two parts. Part One, entitled 'The experience of rurality', has five chapters that establish the general context of rural social work and review the experiences of minority individuals and groups in rural areas and the sorts of service responses that have been made to them. Chapter 5, the final chapter in this section, summarises and reviews some of the general problems and possibilities of rural practice. Part Two of the book is entitled 'Developing rural practice'. Chapters 6 and 7 set out two broad approaches to developing

and providing rural social services, focusing first upon the delivery of personal social services and then addressing community-oriented approaches. We have presented these approaches separately for clarity although our view is that, in practice, rural social workers may need to use a range of interventions from casework to community development. Chapter 8 then reviews the education and training, recruitment and retention of rural practitioners. The book ends with a short conclusion that summarises the main themes of the book and offers some pointers for developments in education, research and practice.