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A Conceptual Model for Rural Social Work

Michael R. Daley

Abstract: *As long as social workers have considered rural social work unique from other fields of practice there has been a search to capture the essence of rural social work. Is it a rural-urban dichotomy, is it geographically or community bound, and what are the principles that guide rural practice? Answers to these questions are important to education for future social workers and rural practice. The author examines key issues in rural social work and their influence on rural social work.*

Introduction

Since the 1970s a growing body of literature indicates that social work with rural populations has enough unique characteristics to be viewed as a distinct field of professional practice. In this regard social work with rural populations differs from similar types of work with urban groups in significant ways (Carlton-LaNey, Edwards, & Reid, 1999; Ginsberg, 2005; Johnson, 1980; and NASW, 2006). Yet despite the growing belief that rural social work is somehow distinct, the profession still struggles with how to frame those differences, and the literature contains some interesting contradictions.

The idea that rural social workers view their field of practice as fundamentally different from their urban colleagues is not surprising. Mellow's (2005) work on rural professionals indicates that they typically do differentiate themselves on a number of dimensions from their urban peers. The classic dilemma in which social workers find themselves is that the impersonal aspect of the relationship and the formal expertise emphasized in the professional model of helping are often in conflict with social norms of rural communities that value personal attributes and reliance upon those relationships for help.

Professional education, particularly in social work, has derived from urban models and is often centered in urban areas (Daley and Avant 1999; Daley and Avant, 2004). Since social workers enter the profession through formal education, if the models of professional education and often the centers of professional education focus on work with urban populations, what is the best way to adapt the preparation of social workers to best fit rural practice? If we do not adapt our models and methods of preparation for rural social work, then we are leaving many social workers to figure this out on their own, a very non-professional way to proceed. If we cannot or do not specifically identify the differences between working with rural and urban populations, then one may ask are these areas of practice really so different?

The answers may lie in how we define and conceptualize rural social work. The purpose of this paper is to address some of these issues by examining the concept of rural social work and the different ways in which it is viewed, by exploring the theoretical models upon which rural practice may be based, and by making suggestions for an integrative approach that resolves some of these apparent contradictions.

Defining Rural Social Work

One of the key issues that must be considered in any discussion related to rural social work is how the term "rural" is defined because rural can have many connotations. There are multiple definitions of rural, and all of them are more or less appropriate for use. Unfortunately, some confusion and even contradiction can be generated when "rural" is used as a unitary concept without adequate explanation of the definitional context in which it is used. In others words, it may sound like we are talking about the same thing under the rubric of rural when we may be discussing either similar or even very different kinds of concepts.

Perhaps the most appealing definition of rural is the absolute approach based on population size. This type of definition relies on a population threshold that makes rural urban classification of communities relatively straightforward. Thus, a community is clearly rural or urban. Even here we are confronted with varying population thresholds.

Olaveson, Conway and Shaver (2004) discuss three population thresholds that are in use at the present time. These thresholds include 2,500; 50,000; and one based on population density that was introduced in the 2000 census. Thus, once a community rises above an arbitrary population figure or density, it no longer is considered rural. So if a community reaches 50,000 or 50,001, it becomes metropolitan, yet if it is only 49,999, it is non- metropolitan. One may speculate whether a variation of one, ten, a hundred, or even a thousand is a meaningful difference in determining a distinction in the characteristics of a metropolitan or rural community. An additional concern is that the use of this type of absolute method for community classification as either rural or urban has led us to reinforce the idea that the rural and urban classification for communities is a dichotomy.

While these population thresholds produce an apparent level of certainty about whether a community is rural or not, they only partially address the kinds of issues that are most relevant for most rural social workers. Social workers are more concerned about the behavioral effects on individuals, families, and groups; organizational structures; and community activity that result from the rural community than they are about its actual size. While there is a general belief about the association of community size with its structure and functioning the nature of this association fairly general. Thus, absolute numbers do not give us a good picture of the community because communities are very complex entities composed of a number of elements. For a clearer picture of what matters to social workers, we may also need to consider sociological definitions of rural.

The term “rurality” has been used by sociologists for over forty years to refer to the type of community that exhibits rural characteristics (Bealer, Willitis, and Kuvlesky, 1965). The concept of rurality assesses communities in structural terms. The rural community is then composed of the structural dimensions of occupations, ecology, and sociocultural elements. This is a relativistic definition of rural (Bealer, Willitis, and Kuvlesky, 1965) that some would argue taps the kinds of issues that confront social workers in rural practice directly.

The occupational aspect of rurality examines the types of employment by suggesting that rural communities have higher concentrations of workers who confront the physical elements and convert its products into economic goods. Agriculture, hunting, fishing, and logging would be examples of this type of activity. The ecological component of rurality examines the distribution of people across a geographic area. The belief is that these density patterns affect a number of characteristics like anonymity, division of labor, heterogeneity, social interaction, and symbols of status (Bealer, Willitis, and Kuvlesky, 1965). The sociocultural dimension of rurality consists of both culture and patterns of social interaction. This would include norms, ideals, and patterns of communication.

Daley and Avant (2004) and Olaveson, Conway, and Shaver (2004) have discussed the concept of rurality in social work. Daley and Avant (2004) indicate the use of a relative definition of rural community based on a person-in environment perspective is well suited for rural social work. Olaveson, Conway, and Shaver suggest continued refinement of the use of the absolute population density measures to make the assessment of the “rurality” of an area more accurate. Clearly for social work purposes, we must consider both absolute and relative measures to accurately reflect the type of variables critical to social work with rural populations.

Having considered a basic framework for assessing the rurality of a community, this paper moves on to consider how to social work with rural populations may be conceptualized. This discussion will focus around two major issues. First, is rural social work practice a function of community or population? Second, what is a good model for understanding rural social work?

Rural Social Work: Revisiting the Concept of Practice

Perhaps the most basic dialogue in the field of rural social work is the one that contrasts rural social work as social work in a rural community with one that defines rural social work as social work with rural populations. One school of thought is that rural social work is generally confined to rural or small communities. Many of the more recent publications on rural social work contain this concept in their titles (Carlton-LaNey, Edwards, & Reid, 1999; Ginsberg, 2005; Scales and Streeter, 2004). This perspective leads social workers to focus on aspects of resource development, building on community strengths or assets, and community building.

Daley and Avant (2004) take a more inclusive perspective is that rural social work is work with rural people, wherever they are found. This approach suggests that rural people may be found in communities that may not meet the general definitions of small towns or rural communities. Thus populations who identify themselves as rural and exhibit rural culture, norms, and behaviors may be found in pockets in urban communities, rural areas that have been absorbed by urban encroachment, or in rural communities that have experienced recent growth. Even though people have changed their location or the environment has changed, these populations still approach life and seek help from a rural perspective. One example of this could be found in the Gulf Coast area in the Southeastern United States. Many residents there grew up in rural communities that were heavily dependent on fishing and agriculture for employment. The growth of tourism and resort development has fundamentally changed this region in several respects although the rural culture of the residents often remains.

The idea that rural social work is social work with rural populations compatible to the perspective of rural social work as work in rural communities. Clearly many rural people live in these rural communities and even many states still have significant rural populations (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005). But communities are rarely entirely homogeneous and elements of rural communities often exist with urban areas and vice versa (Mellow, 2005).

The rural population approach to rural social work suggests a broader array of interventions and areas of interests because social workers are working with individuals, families, groups, and organizations as well as communities. Schnore (1966) suggests that the rural-urban variable exists on at least two levels, that of the community and that of the individual. Social workers in developing generalist models of practice expand the areas of interest to five systems including individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. Since there is broad agreement that a generalist model is the one best suited to rural social work, (Daley and Avant, 2004; Ginsberg, 2005; NASW, 2006; and Locke and Winship, 2005) a model of practice that embraces all of these systems seems most appropriate.

Rural Social Work: Revisiting Models of Practice

The preferred model for rural social work appears to be related to the way in which this field of practice is conceptualized. Authors who view this field as a community issue tend to favor community based models of intervention, while the population perspective suggests a broader based range of interventions – usually a generalist approach. A brief discussion of these models appears appropriate at this point.

Martinez-Brawley (1993) suggests a community oriented approach to rural social work that includes integration of services and use of informal as well formal helping networks. Belanger (2005) views rural communities as in need of financial, physical and human capital. She suggests that social workers use the social capital that exists within rural communities to promote positive changes for the community. White and Marks (1999) present a strengths-based model for rural practice that emphasizes building capacity within the community for development activities. Jacobsen (1980) also presents a model of rural social work that is based on community development.

What these models of rural social work have in common is a shared focus on work with the rural community in order to strengthen the ability to solve local problems. In essence all suggest that a form of locality development based on varying assumptions as the preferred method for rural social work. Unfortunately, these community based approaches to practice offer little specific guidance to social workers in rural practice who are engaged in direct practice with individuals, families and groups.

NASW (2006) in its policy statement on rural work recognizes that social workers are well suited to helping rural people with their lives, sustaining their families, and use their strengths to make a positive change in their lives. Daley and Avant (2004) present a model of rural social work that is based on a systems-based strengths perspective that incorporates social exchange theory. In this model social systems provide the framework for understanding problems and developing strategies for addressing them. Social exchange theory provides a basis for understanding the dynamics the interactions and behavior within and between systems. The strengths perspective adds an overall approach for using and building strengths in rural systems that are too often viewed as deficient or dysfunctional.

The model present by Daley and Avant (2004) is broad based and gives a framework work working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. While this model includes community based social work as a method of intervention, it provides a framework for direct practice as well. In addition, this approach appears quite consistent with the generalist model of social work that is recommended for rural social work.

Rural Social Work: The Paradox

Rural work is a field of practice about which we have learned much in the last thirty years. Yet, there is much we still need to learn in order to address some paradoxes about our understanding of this field. Perhaps the most perplexing of these paradoxes is the lingering question – Is rural social work a distinct field of practice? Despite the volumes literature that has been written in recent years there is still not consensus on the answer to this question.

Several sources are quite clear in their support for rural social work as a field of practice distinctive from other fields of practice (Ginsberg, 2005; Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005; NASW, 1999). Usually this distinction is framed in terms of a rural-urban comparison. However, others are just as clear in their position that there is little difference between rural and other types of social work (Memerstein and Sundet, 1998; York, Denton, and 12 Moran, 1998). In fact, Ginsberg (2005) who lists eleven basic principle of rural social work begins his discussion with “the first important principle is that social work with rural populations ...is simply good social work”. This raises the question – Is there really a difference?

It is likely that question is generated by the way in which it is being framed. If one looks at through the lens of a rural-urban dichotomy, there should be differences between the two that are clearly evident. These differences should manifest themselves in obvious differences in the way the rural and urban social works go about the business serving people. But clear differences of this kind do not appear to exist. The important question is why?

The most likely answer is that the rural-urban concept is not a dichotomy. Rural and urban communities rarely exist in the real world in a pure form and elements urban communities can be found in rural communities and vice versa. For example post offices which operate across the country are bound by formal policies and procedures from which they are not free to deviate. Formal policies are more characteristic of urban communities, yet small town post offices are bound by them too. The same may be true of other organizations and institutions that operate from a national, state, or regional base. If rural communities are not pure in type, then the differences between rural and urban communities should be less pronounced. By extension the differences expected between rural and urban social work may not be as great as one might expect.

Gemeinschaft and Gessellschaft is an important sociological theory that is used to explain the differences between rural and urban communities. Gemeinschaft is associated with rural communities and their emphasis on personal relationships. Gessellschaft is associated with the impersonal relationships characteristic of the urban community (Martinez-Brawley, 1990). Yet Mallow (2005) states that that Gemeinschaft and Gessellschaft communities rarely exist in pure form. Rather elements of each type of community tend to become part of the other resulting in a blended type of community.

As communities are truly neither rural nor urban it becomes necessary to talk of a rural-urban continuum rather than a dichotomy. Then communities should be assessed on a Gemeinschaft-Gessellschaft continuum as well.

Conclusion

How does the foregoing affect the concept of rural social work? One must consider that if communities are a blend of rural and elements that this affects the practice of social work with either communities or populations classified as rural. In addition if blending is part of the character of a community, then some degree of blending is likely occurring in rural social work practice.

So while it may seem contradictory to discuss rural social work practice as just good practice while identifying distinct principles of rural social work, there is really no inconsistency. Indeed good social work practice and principles cut across all areas of practice. But as many authors correctly discern, there are a number of ways that good social work must be adapted to be most effective in work with rural populations and communities. The adaptations usually specify learning the culture and communication patterns of the community, paying attention to specific areas of ethical risk such as dual relationships, and becoming a generalist and developing a wide range of intervention skills. While these kinds of adaptations may not appear major to some, they often require a great deal of learning and change on the part of the social worker. But focusing on the rural aspects of practice are essential to the delivery of effective services, much as professionals must adapt their practice to effectively help in social work with children, mental health, or the elderly.

This paper has revisited the concept of rural social work as presented in the literature. What has been proposed is that rural social work is a field of practice that is directed towards work with rural people as well as work with and in rural communities. While many definitions of rural community are based on absolute population numbers, it is often more useful to consider more relativistic definitions of rurality. Models of rural social work often emphasize work with the community, yet a broader based model for working with all of a population's systems is more consistent with the generalist approach that this recommended in the literature. The rural-urban dichotomy in community and in rural practice that is frequently discussed is likely an oversimplification and most communities and populations contain some elements of blending. Hopefully this discussion has contributed to a better understanding of rural social work so that we can continue to develop new approaches and ideas, and advance this field of practice.

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