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“Life should not be lived alone.” --Community Participant

Abstract. Social isolation is closely linked to overall health and well-being and is a serious concern for those in rural areas. Our research seeks insights into the needs experienced in poor rural areas by utilizing letter writing between students and community agency participants as a research methodology. In the letters, we observed that community participants relied upon friend and family style relationships and even viewed their agency relationships as such. This suggests that transforming “professional helping relationships” into alliances that are less impersonal might be in order. Such relationships and connections seemed conducive to the development of empowering self-efficacy. This finding prompts questions regarding the type and quality of relationships that are built and sustained by providers at rural community-based organizations.

Keywords: rural poverty, letter writing, social isolation, attunement, rural social work, community

The lived experience of poverty is often poorly understood. People who do not live in poverty often lack empathy and are unable to relate to those experiencing it (Segal, 2007). Negative attitudes regarding the poor (Lott, 2002) find support in the political rhetoric of “us versus them” as some politicians build walls, instilling a fear of “others.” Many social workers have disengaged from mezzo and macro practice that could mitigate poverty in favor of micro practice that focuses on change within individuals. As a result, the social work profession—once focused on empowering marginalized communities and creating social conditions that encourage engagement—is less likely to embrace action to address this complex and significant social problem.

Rural poverty is even less well understood than poverty in general. In the late 1800s, industrialization in urban settings and its effects on the working class and indigent poor provided considerable impetus for activists and reformers as the urban poor became the focus of sociologists and social workers living, working, and attending school in cities like Chicago (Gurley, 2016). Overwhelmingly bad conditions required immediate intervention from social workers practicing in the city neighborhoods, which led to decades of social work practice focused specifically on poverty as an urban concern. In part as a result of this singular, historical focus on urban areas, less is known about the nature and context of rural poverty (Frank et al., 2021). In the place of empirical research and evidence-based interventions to better understand rural poverty, we find instead a reliance upon the tropes of “resilience” and “self-sufficiency” to

describe and “uplift” the rural poor. The glorification of rugged individualism among the rural poor may have become an impediment to addressing the structural forces underlying rural poverty.

Rapid community and technological change make addressing the structural and social isolation of the rural poor critical (Putnam, 2000). A decline of civic engagement and a shift away from participation in traditional social groups, such as churches and social clubs, constitutes a substantive change in the nature of community (Putnam, 2000). There is a growing concern that rural communities, which are aging faster than average due to younger adults' migration to urban areas, are disproportionately affected by social isolation (Averill, 2003). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the attendant negative effects of prolonged social isolation (Holden, 2020; Wu, 2020). Technology, in particular the growth of social media, is presumed to address some of the resultant community gaps. However, rural communities, which have heavily relied on traditional community configurations, may lack broadband access and other necessary resources (e.g. computer access), and may be poorly equipped to use social media as a substitute for face-to-face engagement. Moreover, a better understanding of the lived-experience of rural poverty is in order (Frank et al., 2021). Due to the limited knowledge of what living in rural areas marked by deep pockets of durable poverty is like, more research is warranted. Our research aims to broaden our understanding on this matter by seeking insights into rural poverty utilizing letter writing as a research methodology (Frank et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Poverty in Rural Areas

Historically, poverty was most visible in burgeoning cities and, as a result, poverty was conceptualized as an *urban problem* (Boyer, 1978; Katz, 1986). Early focus on urban areas of need positioned rural poverty as a less visible or urgent dilemma. This trajectory has continued to the present day, and this focus has informed policy and professional social work practice. People living in the country are perceived to be self-sufficient and able to live off the land or otherwise care for themselves (Gurley, 2016). Rural poverty continues to remain mostly unseen because urban residents romanticize the idea of the rural idyll, without considering relevant hardships (Pruitt, 2007). Local leaders also have participated in this dynamic by constructing rural residents as resourceful, which served to justify concentrating scarce governmental resources elsewhere and erased the needs of those living outside the city limits (Lawson et. al, 2008). The assumption that self-reliance or social relationships are an adequate substitute for public resources ignores the challenges faced by rural residents and their support networks (Jensen et. al, 2020).

Poverty statistics demonstrate that the perception of poverty as a largely urban problem is largely false. The United States Census Bureau estimates approximately 34 million people have incomes below the poverty threshold (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2021a). Since 1960, the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) has been tasked with measuring the gap between metro and non-metro poverty. Their recent findings indicate that the poverty rate was 15.4% for non-metro areas and 11.9% in metro areas (USDA-ERS, 2021). One out of every four rural counties are classified as high poverty, and some rural

areas have experienced sustained levels of poverty for so long that they are specifically designated as persistent poverty counties (CRS, 2021b; Farrigan, 2020).¹ The spatial concentration of rural poverty is such that the counties with the highest rates of poverty tend to remain poor over time, and levels of concentrated poverty in rural areas are higher than in metro areas (Thiede et. al., 2018). Further, rural poverty disproportionately affects children and older Americans (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004; Glasgow & Brown, 2012).

In many ways, rural poverty can be seen as a predominantly “white” problem. In rural areas, whites make up about 80% of the population, which starkly contrasts with their 58% representation in urban areas. While in general whites might experience poverty at a lower rate overall than groups of color, in rural areas specifically, whites accounted for approximately 65% of the poor in 2017 (USDA, 2018). Poverty experienced by people of color can be broadly attributed to institutionalized racism, but white rural poverty has no such narrative, which Gurley (2016) states has created an “implicit belief that whites—who have benefitted from all the advantages that come with being white— have no reason to be poor” (p. 600). This belief contributes to the isolation experienced by rural residents, who often are stereotyped as “white trash” and “hillbillies” in mainstream media (Gurley, 2016). These representations of the poor as “deviant outsiders” inevitably frame how they are perceived by their local government (Lawson et al., 2008, p. 750). These tropes, coupled with a reliance on the pervasive belief in a “culture of poverty” that asserts poverty is a result of individual behavior, lessens support for programs benefiting those living in poverty (Delavega et. al, 2017). If local elected officials, who are tasked with allocating resources to their communities, do not appropriately understand the needs of the rural poor, very serious health and wellbeing needs will remain unmet.

Rural Well-Being

People living in poor rural areas experience disadvantages resulting from insufficient transportation, childcare, housing, and limited economic and educational opportunities (Pruitt, 2007). Further, literature shows that accessibility of healthcare for rural dwellers is often inadequate. Rural populations tend to be older and poorer, and face cumulative disadvantages such as hospital closures, healthcare worker shortages, increasing health problems, lower incomes, and limited public transportation to access healthcare services (Mantel, 2019). Long term public health initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s focused on improvements to the health of urban residents and the urban poor, which left rural areas behind. As a result, the health outcomes for rural residents plummeted, and the rural poor are now more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, injury, respiratory disease or stroke compared to their urban counterparts (Cosby et al., 2019). A greater share of rural residents is covered by federal programs such as SNAP, Medicare, and Medicaid, and changes to these safety net programs can have negative unintended consequences for rural health outcomes (Jensen et al., 2020). For example, cuts to Medicaid and Medicare reimbursement have resulted in hospital closures, which have a ripple effect on local economies and the wellbeing of rural residents (Ellison, 2021; Mantel, 2019). In fact, according to Ellison, 2020 saw a record high number of rural hospital closures.

¹ Defined as a 20% poverty rate for the population over the last 30 years

Social Isolation

Humans have always depended on social connections and relationships to foster physical health and emotional well-being, but the past forty years have seen increased loneliness as community structures have changed (Reiner, 2018). And while social isolation can occur at any stage of life, older adults are at particular risk. Their social isolation can be characterized by a lack of meaningful, consistent, reliable connections, which can be lethal (Kaye & Singer, 2019).

Social isolation is closely linked to overall health and well-being (Cornwell & Waite, 2009) and is a serious concern for those in rural areas (National Rural Health Association [NRHA], 2020). One study by the NRHA (2020) found that 25% of older adults in rural areas were socializing with other people less than once per month. Social isolation brings with it a whole host of health concerns for older adults. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) note that loneliness and social isolation are linked to lifestyle behaviors and health challenges, which are often associated with premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). One study found that both loneliness and social isolation were associated with health behaviors such as smoking, poor sleep habits, and physical inactivity (Holt-Lunstad, et al., 2015). Further, they found that the effect of loneliness and social isolation on older adults' health is similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. In fact, a 2017 study by the American Association of Retired Persons demonstrated that the health impact of social isolation on older adults cost the Medicare program upwards of \$7 billion each year (Flowers et al., 2017). According to Kaye and Singer (2019), socially isolated individuals have higher morbidity and mortality rates, and social isolation has been found to increase the relative risk ratio of depression by 13%. Similarly, Bu, Steptoe, and Fancourt (2020) and Bu, Philip, and Fancourt (2020) found that lonely individuals are at higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, cognitive decline, higher levels of inflammation, and impaired immune regulation, which are associated with stress and chronic depression.

Attending to Rural Poverty and Social Isolation

Studies show the positive effects of having social support for those with social isolation. One study by Reiner (2018) refers to a strategy for dealing with social isolation as *friend power*:

Genuine friendship and authentic connection...increase the sense of belonging and purpose, boost happiness and reduce stress, improve self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, help cope with traumas, serious illness, or death of a loved one, encourage us to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits (Reiner, 2018, p. 69).

According to Reiner (2018), evidence shows that a close connection to the right person improves cognition, and authentic, caring friendship will fulfill the needs of adults growing older, people with disabilities, and people with various forms of dementia (Reiner, 2018).

Collaboration and creativity might be necessary to address social isolation in rural areas. Specifically in rural areas, structural barriers such as a lack of public transportation and inadequate broadband access might impede efforts to address social isolation. For example, virtual program and service delivery (e.g., Zoom-based case management) might provide opportunities to better meet the needs of rural populations (Smith et al, 2020); however, in rural

areas marked by poverty, such technology might be unavailable. Averill (2003) found that caring, holistic interventions such as listening, honoring, acknowledging, and incorporating multiple perspectives to reflect caring and empathy, can help individuals mitigate the challenges of social isolation. Averill (2003) also indicated the benefits of community partnerships across professional and non-professional, formal and informal group lines in providing health and daily life services in rural and underserved areas. It seems that sometimes what is needed is a “friend” and modern social work practice could discourage such efforts in light of rigid definitions of “professionalism.”

Letter Writing as Qualitative Research

As we demonstrated in the literature review for our prior research (Frank et al., 2021), letter writing is an accepted qualitative research methodology. While it has been most frequently seen in therapeutic environments, it also has been used in non-therapeutic environments. Less seen is letter writing’ use as a primary research tool. Stamper (2020) argued for the use of letter writing as a research tool including the need to critique it. Increased use of letter writing as a research tool is likely to validate the use of the methodology and improve it over time, or it could lead to reconsideration of its value. In sum, letter writing has been seen as a safe environment in which letter writers remain in control of the delivery of their story. Letter writing has been indicated as a useful research method specifically when people are separated by geographical distance, as in the case with rural populations (Stamper, 2020). Additionally, a series of letters--rather than just a single letter--might be most effective.

Method

Research Design

The current study is situated in a larger body of work that examines human connections between students and participants of an agency that attends to rural poverty (Frank et al., 2019; 2020; 2021). We are building upon our past research by using new findings to inform the research questions and methodologies that follow, moving strategically from deductive to inductive analysis. Here, we use a narrative approach to inform our qualitative research design, which included two qualitative components, letter writing and follow up interviews. Methodological triangulation, or the use of multiple qualitative methods to examine the topic, was used here to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Flick, 2018; Padgett, 2008).

Letter Writing as Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry can “bring to light marginalized people’s experiences, changing our perceptions of them” (Chase, 2018, p. 553). Narrative inquiry seeks to explore the stories that individuals tell about their own lives and experiences, as to understand the meaning of those interpretations. Narratives can take many forms, such as stories shared during interviews or even images and artwork created (Chase, 2018). Here we utilized letters as a type of narrative. To address how little we know about rural poverty, we have developed letter writing as a low barrier research method for exploring it in detail and on the participants' terms.

While a somewhat novel approach, the use of letter writing in research provides the opportunity for the participant to be empowered in the research process, retaining more control and comfort over what and how their information is observed (Stamper, 2020). As piloted in our earlier work (Frank et al., 2021), we demonstrated that letter writing can be used to access the personal narratives of individuals who may have external (e.g., lack of transportation) or internal barriers (e.g., being shy), which make their stories less accessible. Letter writing allows the writer to share the story that feels comfortable in a time and place at the respondent's choosing, apart from the obtrusiveness of an interviewer (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Letter writing, which formed our main data collection method, was followed by in-depth interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to further explore the perspectives of community members who had participated in the letter writing to learn more about their perspectives.

Data Collection

Students enrolled in a course about poverty were invited to participate in a letter writing exchange with individuals who utilize services at an agency attending to rural poverty. The course, *Perspectives on Poverty*, was a seminar course that employed various types of experiential learning to help students learn about poverty and develop introductory social work skills such as empathy and awareness. Community participants were referred to the project from The Community Center (*name changed*), an agency in a local rural area marked by poverty. The Community Center participants were recruited to the research by agency staff who invited them to voluntarily participate. The Community Center emphasizes the engagement of community participants, and a sense of family, rather than simply "providing services." Letter writing aligned well with their method of engagement and the agency's approach was conducive to earnest and enthusiastic participation in the project by community members.

In the Fall of 2019, 26 community members and 29 students participated in the letter-writing phase of the project. Here, the students and community members were randomly paired. In some cases, the case manager from the agency made suggestions about which community participants might benefit from writing to a group of two students rather than a single student as there were a few more students than community participants. Four rounds of letters were exchanged, with two letters written by the community participant and two letters written by the student. Letters were screened by agency personnel and the research team prior to the letter exchange. Because a goal of this research was to explore what people choose to communicate about when given the opportunity, only very rarely was information shared in a letter flagged by the research team for additional assessment into the appropriateness of the content. After four rounds of letters, a dinner event was held where pen pals met and shared a meal and conversation. At the conclusion of this event, community members were invited to sign up for an individual interview to discuss the experience further. These interviews were held at a location of the participants choosing.

Five qualitative follow up interviews were conducted with voluntary participants. Interviews took place within six weeks from recruitment using a flexible interview guide (Appendix A). Interviews took place either at the agency office or at the participant's home, at the discretion of the participant. Each interview was approximately 60-90 minutes long. The interviews were audio recorded (with permission) and then transcribed. Transcribed interviews

were uploaded to Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis software package, for analysis. Interviews followed a flexible interview guide (Appendix A) but we made extra effort to allow the respondents to share their ideas and insights about community, social services, and their relationship to the Community Center.

Data Analysis of Letters

Our analysis strategy in this study is informed by our prior research. In our first iteration of this project in the fall of 2018, our analysis followed two stages. Then, we created an a priori framework with analytic themes generated from a thorough literature review, experience teaching this course, and our knowledge of local commonsense constructs (Frank et al., 2021) as follows:

- Everyone's journey matters;
- Reconceptualization of poverty: the urgency of rural poverty & rural poverty is forgotten; and
- Social work professional boundaries.

Our deductive analysis in that study confirmed these themes. We then identified and explored emergent themes (i.e., inductively), summarized as follows:

- Personal experiences with social isolation;
- Rural poverty is urgent and forgotten; and
- Connection that transcends socioeconomic barriers.

Here, in our current study, we utilized these emergent themes from our prior work (listed immediately above) as the *deductive* framework for our analysis now. We were also open to new emergent themes.

Our analysis of the letters focused only on the 51 individual letters written by the community participants. Each letter had the identifying information removed and was renamed with a letter and number. An excel sheet was created to organize the analysis where we used the deductive themes to frame our approach. The research team consisted of four faculty researchers, including the teacher of the course, as well as three master's level research assistants. The researchers coded the letters line by line who then discussed their findings as a large group. We collectively compared each piece of data to our deductive framework and sought emergent themes. If there was any disagreement about how to code or analyze a piece of data, which there rarely was, this piece of data was removed from the analysis. The research team also engaged in memo-writing where we made notes to ourselves when something of interest came from the data. These memos helped inform our inductive analysis.

We utilized a confirmatory, deductive framework based on the 2018 findings of the project for the initial analysis of our data. This was followed by an inductive exploration of emergent themes. We continued an iterative process to confirm the validity and reliability of the method as well as the findings. As noted above, or prior research findings were used as the framework for our *deductive* analysis:

- Personal experiences with social isolation;
- Rural poverty is urgent and forgotten; and
- Connection that transcends socioeconomic barriers.

In the current study we also looked for new emergent themes which we explored further using an *inductive* process. These new emergent themes were:

- Personal empowerment and faith;
- Rural poor need more from social workers/a reconceptualization of the helping relationship.

Data Analysis of Interviews

Because the letters were conducted first, we had the letter themes as a loose framework for our initial analysis of our interviews. In order to remain as open as possible to the emergence of new themes in the interviews, we approached the interview data, line by line, using a thematic analysis for our coding. Interviews were transcribed and uploaded to Dedoose qualitative software for analysis. Dedoose is a web-based qualitative software platform that allows for multiple users to collaborate on a single project. Transcripts were coded line by line. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, multiple coders independently coded each transcript. With the first pass of codes, 227 individual codes were created. In some cases, data were coded in multiple ways. These 227 codes were collapsed into eight parent codes which began to represent the main themes assessed in the project. These main eight parent codes were:

- Community Connections;
- Services & Organizations;
- Together with Others;
- Loneliness, Loss, and Disconnection;
- Infrastructure & Poverty;
- Human Connection & Pen Pals;
- HUB, Places to Connect, & Place; and
- Faith & Spirituality.

Through discussion and analysis these codes were collapsed further to best describe the overarching themes of the study which we found:

- Isolation & Loneliness;
- Failed Infrastructure; and
- Human Networks.

Thus, findings from the interviews clearly reinforced findings from the letters, as these three overarching themes from the interviews dove-tailed perfectly into our prior framework. Here we will discuss our findings from the project using the data from both the letters and the interviews.

Results

Personal Experiences with Social Isolation/Isolation & Loneliness

According to our deductive framework, we expected to see content on social isolation, and we did. Having worked with this agency for several years, we were familiar with the limited resource landscape of the area and had a general feel for the dispersion of people which could lead to social disconnection here.

We noted much discussion of loss in the letters. Writers shared about family members, friends, and pets who had died, indicating for them great personal loss. One community participant noted that *“our blood family has completely abandoned us”* (P24). Another participant noted that they *“just had to put my best friend--my dog--down two months ago and I'm still not over that”* (P3). In their second letter they continued this line of discussion and shared that they *“can't seem to get over him...He was my baby...I am thinking about going to the pound and getting one a little older”* (P3).

Participants shared more about loneliness in their follow up interviews in ways that validated prior findings but also added more depth to the emotions of it. One participant noted in her interview that *“Rates of depression of people when they get older and retire and lose partners and whatever, the rates of depression skyrocket because all of the sudden what happened to all my connections?”* (P18). The same participant went further to personally share that *“I went to a real dark place. I was ready to commit suicide”* (P18). A different participant noted in their follow up interview that he doesn't *“know how to get help anymore...And sometimes because of that I don't want to put an extra effort into it because I think it's just always a waste of time.”* (P6). Discussions about loneliness deepened in the context of the interviews. One participant touched on loss of important connections through life changes, indicating that she felt a sense of helplessness in the experience of losing connections:

“I don't know what happened [to] my friends, just, life...I even reached out to a couple of my friends. ‘Listen, can't you please come over and keep me company. I am so lonely; I mean, I just don't know what to do with myself.’ They never.... They get all wound up in their lives. That's what happens to us, ya know, and uh, we don't, somehow along the way we lost something. Kindness and just listening” (P18).

One factor that might have contributed to the theme of social isolation was the nature of relationships themselves which in some cases seemed to be wrought with trouble or the weariness of bearing the weight of others' troubles over time:

“Most people don't want to hear someone talk about their troubles. Friends fall by the wayside, they get weary. I always thought that your friends will help you bear your burdens. I see that is mostly not the case. Sometimes, friends think they know what's best for you. Other times, they just don't want to be around negativity, depression, or suffering” (P19).

It seemed that technology was unable to bridge the gap that social isolation created. One community participant noted in their letter that *"we are in a civilization that is mostly digital. I don't like social media, I don't do Facebook so it's very hard to connect...out here in rural (areas), there's not much going on except Amish auctions & such"* (P19). Social isolation permeated the stories that we collected and were summed up in the insight shared by a participant who simply stated that *"life should not be lived alone"* (P1).

Rural Poverty Urgent and Forgotten/Failed Infrastructure

Respondents made a clear connection between social isolation and poverty and there was a sense of teetering on the edge of not having daily needs met with consistency and the vulnerability of such a state. One participant expanded on this in their interview, connecting the issue of loneliness to a lack of social support in the community. She explained that *"There's no senior center, you know a lot of us are just downright lonely, and that's something people just don't consider. And I just seen or heard or read somewhere that loneliness takes eight years off your life"* (P18). Another participant (P24) noted in a letter that she never knows when she can get a ride. She explained that she is always wondering if she is going to end up homeless. Another respondent explained: *"I live in a little shack in the woods." "I don't know what I would do without the help I get from the [Community Center]"* (P3).

The notion that rural poverty is dire and that the rural poor believe they are forgotten was a persistent theme in our findings. One participant noted that: *"Rural poverty impacts everyone who lives here...not enough jobs that have insurance, housing is too expensive, all my money goes to rent and oil to heat the house"* (P20). In her follow up interview, she added her insight that *"We stay poor because the state don't give us raises for social security, but yet they're raising prices of food and housing, so..."* (P20). Another shared that now that her father is gone, she and her mother *"have no car and struggle every month to pay rent and bills and to just get groceries"* (P24). One participant illustrated deeply in their interview how pervasive failed infrastructure is in their rural area, saying:

"There is no transportation, there is no mass transportation. So even if there was a place to go to, well how do you get there? There is (sic) no grocery stores. The biggest thing that really gripes me is there's no police! You have to rely on the state police, and hopefully you're not being murdered or raped because they're going to take at least 45 minutes to get to the place where you're talking about" (P18).

We found that individuals in rural areas are struggling for both resources and connection and that these needs were very interrelated.

Connection that Transcends Socioeconomic Barriers/Human Networks

Because this was the second year of examining letters between first-year students and agency participants, we expected to find that low-barrier connector topics serve to bridge the socioeconomic distance between correspondents and facilitate connection on a human level. We dug deeply into these conversations to understand how low-stakes and low-barrier conversations work to overcome any perceived hierarchy between a community participant and a student. As

we expected, both participants and students alike discussed pets, animals, sports, nature, hobbies, and crafts. These themes seemed to act as a bridge between parties so that other themes would have space to emerge.

In fact, letters from the participants were filled with empowerment language and encouragement. Examination of our memos revealed that we had expected the student to take on the “social work” role and the community member to act as the receiver of encouragement. Most often, the opposite occurred. Community participants gave the students advice and felt empowered to act as the “mentor” and the “encourager.” For example, one participant provided the following advice to the student:

“It seems if you hang in there long enough in life, you do get what you want...if you are going through a difficult time, just hanging in there and being patient and allowing things to be what they are automatically changes them when the time is right” (P11).

Several others encouraged the students to pursue their dreams and to cultivate hopefully futures such as: *“I hope that you have an exciting college future” (P1)* and:

“Follow your dreams and accomplish all that you can in your life. Do not ever let anything or anyone change your outlook on what you want to do in your life. Also be all that you can be and just make your life happy and stay strong and go succeed in whatever you choose to do” (P8).

Community members had a lot of professional and school advice for their student:

“Study hard but balance it out also” (P1).

“Set your goals high and don't let anyone discourage you” (P4).

“No matter how hard it seems to be, stay in school” (P3).

“If you have a job you enjoy, you will never 'work' a day in your life!” “It has been scientifically proven that those who give are more successful” (P26).

Much of this reinforced for us that the helping relationship can be mutually beneficial, and that socioeconomic status does not preclude human connection. One participant shared innovative ideas regarding mutual aid in an interview noting that:

“Even seniors who are capable would be wonderful childcare. A childcare place with volunteer seniors, you know your kids are going to be in good hands, ya know, at least you think they are anyway. Um you know there's so many bridges” (P18).

Many participants encouraged the students to pursue authentic relationships and to be authentic in the helping relationship as a social worker. This indicated for us that perhaps they had been on the receiving end of the opposite.

"Whatever you do when you get out in the field, do not lie to people. You should always be completely honest, even if you do not agree with the policies. Just be honest" (P6).

One Community Participant encouraged the student to: *"Make friends that you can trust and honestly talk with and who will hold your confidence" (P1)*. While this seems only like advice, it also seemed to double as evidence that people are truly seeking human relationships not just services. Another told the student that *"making new acquaintances can be difficult... Choose carefully" (P22)*.

Emergent Themes (Inductive Exploration)

Personal Empowerment & Faith

We also looked for emergent or unexpected themes and found several. Our first emergent finding hinged on the utility of the empowerment language we noted above. It appears that in the presence of extreme loneliness and the absence of formal structures that might help, community participants themselves garnered the resilience necessary to become those structures themselves. That is, without reliable structures and institutions, people in poor rural areas seemed to depend on human networks for connection and resources. Despite their own limited resources, often they need to become these human connections and structures for others. This showed up in the letters as the empowerment language of resilience.

Community members did not paint themselves as victims, or even as "clients" but as individuals with human agency. As one community participant explained: *"I chose to give up waitressing and go to college." (P5)*. We noted this because she did not choose to write that she was "unemployed" but instead completely defined her situation as her choice. Another did not call herself homeless, but instead explained that she was *"living with a friend right now while I wait for an apartment to open up" (P7)*. One participant was empowered to start a Facebook group to help connect people struggling with bill paying and employment with resources (P21). Another participant noted that they receive SSI *"because of being considered bipolar" (P11)* which we found to be an interesting way to distance oneself from the categories and walls created by others and used to define them.

This deep sense of personal dignity was coupled with strong notions of faith and spirituality that seemed to inform this way of being. One participant noted: *"God bless you and give you peace" (P17)* and another: *"Always believe in God because he will get you out of very, very tight places. Your faith will get you through" (P3)*. Another noted that she is strengthened by going on religious retreats and listening to praise and worship music. The same participant also explained that she volunteers to fold the bulletins for a local church and prays over each one that she folds. This seemed to be a way for her to use her faith to impact her community in a way that was meaningful to her.

Rural Poor Need More from Social Workers/A Reconceptualization of Helping

Participants seemed to take these empowered notions and redefine their own relationship to the community and The Community Center. One respondent noted that she is not lonely

because she has many church friends, she does not let her work define her... her relationships do! (P1). This respondent indicated that she used the church and the internet to connect and close social distance. This same writer explained that she was “*a friend of [The Community Center]*” and did not use the word “client” but “friend.” (P1). Our findings that people were very socially isolated, and sometimes lonely, multiplied these concerns. We became very curious as to what social workers could be doing differently. It appeared that rural families seemed to need more humanness from social workers. They tended to be seeking authentic human relationships and not more social services or social programs.

“[The Community Center] helped me organize bills, set up with [case manager name] to discuss finances, helped me access electronic accounts, provided groceries every few weeks, and gave me [name] to teach me ways to remain calm. She helped alleviate the stress and anxiety I had been feeling. It was always a relief to go to [The Community Center]. I knew they always had great advice and I always felt supported. They had someone to talk to and there was always light at the end of the tunnel” (P13).

One participant noted that “*I can come here and get answers when I have questions I don't have the answer to*” (P23). Another explained that they “*appreciate that social workers are there for us when we need someone to talk to provide us with options and help when we need it. They are guardian angels*” (P24). However, they also explained that “*the one thing I don't appreciate is that sometimes promised things aren't followed through with*” (P24), which demonstrated for us a kind of reciprocal expectation that is really an important aspect of helping in rural communities. We consistently noted this kind of relationship between agency and community participants. Individuals with whom this agency worked seemed to have an empowered sense of self-efficacy, saw themselves as the advice-giver in the pen pal relationship, and did not define themselves as “victims” or even “clients.” In an interview, one participant reinforced a number of themes in her noting that:

“[The Community Center] is what brings the community together. They bring people that don't have anybody to talk to...I met my friends from [the Community Center], and they're the only ones I talk to. I know I can trust them, they know they can trust me. We go to cooking classes, and that's like, the best thing they have. And then we sit around and eat and we chat” (P20).

Community members are part of the organization's “family,” for however long and in whatever capacity is needed or desired at that time. In this sense, the organization seems to provide a framework for facilitating the connections that would have previously been made by someone's family or friends. Connections within the Community Center fill in the gaps. Through the relationships the Community Center creates, the notion of “client” is deconstructed while the nature of community is reconstructed to address the social isolation of people living in rural poverty. The agency's approach facilitates the construction of sinews of community connection, individual empowerment, and mutual aid.

Discussion

Conceptualizing poverty as an “urban issue” is a mistake. People living in poor rural areas are at risk for social isolation and a host of other human problems. Poor rural areas that lack appropriate infrastructure and resources need the direct attention of public officials and social workers. Our data demonstrated the raw realities of the lived-experience of social isolation and poverty in rural areas. We found that basic needs often are not met, and rural areas often lack the structure necessary to engage in successful self-improvement. Social workers must attend to these needs in ways that celebrate personal strengths and encourage self-efficacy but do not neglect the advocacy needed for enduring structural change.

The letters and interviews both revealed a powerful group of individuals living in rural poverty and social isolation. As we connected the dots above, we began to envision a possible reconceptualization of how community agencies can create helping relationships in areas marked by rural poverty and social isolation. The participants shared in their letters the devastation of loss and of limited resources, of feeling forgotten and experiencing loneliness. Yet they revealed their empowerment and a sense of self-efficacy when they spoke about themselves and advised or connected with students through their letters. The ability of the participants to do this seems to be connected to the way in which they relate to the social service organization itself.

In the letters, we observed that community participants viewed organization staff as part professional, part family or friend. This suggests that transforming “helping relationships” into lower barrier relationships that incorporate expertise and wisdom, professionalism and human connection might be in order. Relationships with agency staff seemed to fill a gap when friends and family were not available. In our study, the power of low-barrier connector topics and the sharing of personal information about pets, sports, and life experiences stood in contrast to the suggestion that true professionalism benefits from firm boundaries. Such relationships and connections seemed conducive to the development of empowering self-efficacy. Our analysis of the data suggests that clients benefit significantly from the relationships developed with providers, perhaps even more than they do “services” per se. This finding prompts questions regarding the type and quality of relationships that are built and sustained by providers at rural community-based organizations. Not all service providers at this agency are professional social work practitioners. Is it possible that our concern with professionalism creates barriers that frustrate the creation of the connection’s clients seek?

The bifurcation of “micro” and “macro” practice and assignment of emotional support to the former to the exclusion of the latter may represent another area ripe for exploration. Even professional direct practice social workers who are trained to address emotional pain are encouraged to “support emotional health” as a prerequisite for helping the client to achieve emotional and physical independence. Does the isolation of feelings from the helping process foster dehumanization and feelings of disconnectedness? Should social work instead promote empowerment models that treat agency participants as “community members” with valuable social contributions rather than “clients” who are poised to receive services? The findings of this study suggest that such changes should be considered.

New models of the helping relationship are needed, specifically in tune with the neglected needs of those in poor rural areas. Conceptualizations from other disciplines, such as psychology, offer clues; social work academics have suggested a return to different ways of practicing as well. In interpersonal neurobiology, relationships between helpers and those they intend to help can be understood through the lens of *attunement* (Seigel, 2007). Developed primarily in the literature exploring maternal-infant connections, the construct has wider applicability. According to Seigel (2007), attunement is the process by which we form relationships; it requires “provider” and “recipient” to develop increased awareness of their internal emotional states. The work is less about the provider “understanding” or “supporting” the client from a distance, and more about reciprocal “checking in” that allows both provider and client to feel connected enough to collaborate. According to Siegel (2007), when we allow ourselves to attune, “we allow our internal state to shift, to come to resonate with the inner world of another. This resonance is at the heart of the important sense of “feeling felt” that emerges in close relationships” (pp. 287). Could it be that “feeling felt” is the meaningful connection that clients seek? While trends of “hyper professionalism” could stand as a barrier to effectively addressing poverty and social isolation in rural areas, an attunement approach might be a successful way to bridge this divide.

However, reconceptualizing the helping relationship, absent related changes in our notions of “structure” will likely have limited impact, and may validate the problematic stereotype of the self-reliant, rural poor who can bootstrap themselves to economic security with just a bit of personal encouragement. Classical, sociological models of community may prove instructive as we work to embed reconceptualized notions of helping in a larger structural context. Tonnies (1887), for example, observed that traditional bonds of family, kinship, and religion that provided the basis for social ties and values (*gemeinschaft* or community) are replaced by functionalism, scientific rationality, and self-interest in modern societies (*gesellschaft* or society). Tonnies posited that the transition from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* was an evolutionary one that was near absolute. Durkheim’s (1893) revisions of Tonnies’ work countered that communal properties of human interaction could be found in both communities and societies; communal properties were personal and cultural and represented needed qualities of healthy relationships in both types of social structure. Durkheim’s inclusion of both culture *and* structure is instructive. Reconceptualizing *how* social workers and social service agencies “relate” to clients may have little impact if those relationships are not situated in the functional structures of a healthy economy. Human connection may offset the pain of being disconnected from jobs, education, and the Internet, but longer term, a personal relationship cannot replace employment, food, and health insurance.

The findings of our study indicate that people in rural areas are resilient and full of agency, however, that sometimes these characteristics have become themselves tropes that inhibit the restructuring of community resources to properly meet their needs. In the absence of structural resources, agencies and the community members themselves are forced to knit together a network of resources in lieu of structural change. Social workers, in particular, should do more to address these trends and bolster these strengths. Respondents shared about their process of fashioning culturally syntonic networks to address need, social isolation, and to create what they considered to be community.

Limitations

The limitations of our study are generally in line with the types of limitations of qualitative research in general such as the inability to generalize to other settings or populations. The design of our research did not allow us to make definitive causal connections between any variables. As noted earlier, this study built upon research done the year before and we utilized our 2018 findings to inform our 2019 inquiry in an iterative process. Because we worked with the same agency there was some overlap in the community participants.

Conclusion

Policies and programs have (at best) misunderstood rural poverty and (at worst) ignored its structure and profound implications. Individuals living in rural communities lack access to the resources necessary for human thriving. A reliance upon personal relationships can sometimes help to fill a gap to address the social isolation that permeates rural living, and overly professional social work services are not an effective substitute for these connections. We used letter writing to learn about the experiences of individuals in poor rural areas and observed the reliance upon friend and family style relationships and often saw their relationships with agency personnel in a similar way. This suggests that transforming "helping relationships" into lower barrier, more personal relationships might be in order. Such relationships and connections seemed conducive to the development of empowering self-efficacy. This finding prompts questions regarding the type and quality of relationships that are built and sustained by providers at rural community-based organizations.

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Appendix A

Flexible Interview Guide

- How long have you lived in this community?
- How did you get involved with The Community Center?
- How many times have you participated in our event or one similar before? How many times?
- What stands out most to you from this experience?
- What confirmed your prior assumptions?
- What surprised you?
- What did you learn from the experience?
- How has this experience influenced your perceptions?
- What does community mean to you?