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Book Review: Rural Social Work: Building and Sustaining Community Capacity, 2nd Edition

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Book Review

Rural Social Work: Building and Sustaining Community Capacity, 2nd Edition

T. Laine Scales, Calvin L. Streeter, and H. Stephen Cooper (Eds.)

2014

Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Press

384 pages

Softcover: \$55.00

ISBN-13: 978-1118445167

This essential text focuses on the strengths and assets of rural people and rural communities. The contributors assert that rural social work is a distinct practice area, with roots in community organizing and the strengths perspective. It challenges social workers to move away from viewing rural communities and their social services systems as inferior or lacking, and consider their role as a partner in the collective process. Strengths, asset and capacity building, and wraparound care are major themes.

Three distinguished editors, T. Laine Scales, Calvin L. Streeter, and H. Stephen Cooper, collaborated with another two dozen contributing authors on this second edition. Dr. Scales is Professor of Higher Education and Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas. Dr. Streeter is the Meadows Foundation Centennial Professor in the Quality of Life in the Rural Environment and former chair of the Community and Administrative Leadership Concentration in Social Work at The University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Cooper is Associate Professor of Social Work and Associate Dean, College of Liberal and Applied Arts at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. The editors include chapters that knit nicely together, giving the reader the experience of a continuous volume, rather than a collection of articles. This was skillfully accomplished by including the strengths and assets models in all chapters, as well as the inclusion of cohesive section introductions. The five sections are (a) conceptual and historical foundations of rural social welfare, (b) human behavior and rural environments, (c) practice issues in rural contexts, (d) policy issues affecting rural populations, and (e) using research to evaluate practice in rural settings.

My BSW students, in a course also titled *Rural Social Work*, generally viewed the book as having three loosely defined “types” of chapters. First, there were the chapters on the history of rural social work and of the Rural Social Work Caucus. Secondly, there were chapters that addressed populations and issues in rural settings within the context of the strengths perspective and asset building. These are tangible concepts for students who might work with LGBT clients, homeless families, African Americans, Latinos, palliative care, or partner with rural congregations. Thirdly, there are chapters describing practice and research methods for rural social work including concept mapping, evidence-based practice, and global information systems (GIS). The chapters in this third group contain more advanced concepts, but the material is accessible to upper division BSW students. Each chapter closes with discussion questions and suggested activities and assignments.

One key message is that social workers must be willing to make cultural adaptations to interventions rather than expecting clients to adapt to a “one size fits all” service delivery system.

This model was helpful for students to understand that cultural competence is not just a matter of being knowledgeable about other cultures, or creating programs for a specific cultural group. They must also be flexible and adaptive in existing programs in order to effectively serve diverse client populations.

Another interesting thread in the text was personal considerations for social workers in rural settings. For example, rural social workers may need to consider professional development opportunities offered online through webinars or video streaming. Rural social workers are likely to spend more time travelling in their typical workday and may need supportive technology such as GPS and tablets. Dual and multiple relationships may be more difficult to avoid in rural communities, and social workers must be prepared to meet these challenges.

My students were also intrigued with the assertion that rural social workers should be willing to work collaboratively with local congregations. The role of faith communities in both informal and “home grown” human service delivery and local leadership was emphasized, as well as the social worker’s responsibility to learn to communicate effectively with the members of the congregation. Cultural and spiritual considerations in alternative healthcare were introduced. For example, clients may choose to consult with pharmacists, faith healers, and preachers or priests as their primary provider in an “ethnomedical” approach to healthcare.

The only minor criticism is that while the authors cautioned against romanticizing rural life, that notion still crept into a few places. When comparing rural to urban people, the rural individuals always sounded like better human beings. Still, this is a small critique to an excellent book.

The text is appropriate for BSW and MSW courses, and should be considered an essential volume for university libraries. In addition to being used in rural social work electives, the book would be useful in multicultural and research courses.

I also used this text as the foundation for a Rural Social Work alternative fall break trip. Our itinerary included visits to a rural homeless shelter, a very rural church, migrant farmworker camps and service agency, and a rural food justice movement. Students were the most impressed with our visit to Spring Hope, NC, where we spent an entire morning with the town manager and community development leaders. Even though 15 of the 16 students had grown up in rural settings, they were amazed at how much energy rural private citizens put into strengthening their communities. The text provided the foundation for students to understand that rural communities have existing resources and strengths, though they may look quite different from the urban model.

Reviewer Information

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