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Book Review: Rural Social Work in the 21st Century

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Book Review

by Peter A. Kindle

Rural Social Work in the 21st Century

Michael R. Daley

2015

Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books

309 pages

Paperback, \$49.95.

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Anyone who has taken on the challenge of completing a dissertation will understand how valuable a good synthesis of prior research can be. Michael Daley has provided just such a gift to rural social workers and social work programs focusing on the preparation of rural social workers. This folksy, accessible, and sometimes quaint synthesis of the most recent scholarship on rural social work, almost two-thirds of the 420 chapter endnotes are dated since the turn of the millennium, was enriched by Daley's decades of experience as a rural social work program director and educator coupled with his leadership experience as president of the National Rural Social Work Caucus and Association of Baccalaureate Program Directors. Intentionally avoiding the more common edited book approach to rural content, Daley's ten chapters speak with a singular and wise voice. Every social work educator teaching a course on rural social work needs to quickly get a copy of this book.

The historical roots of the social work profession were urban, and to some extent, contemporary social workers are more likely to be educated and employed in an urban or suburban context as Daley demonstrates in his introductory chapter. Preferring a sociocultural understanding of *rural* to geographical or population density definition helps the reader grasp one of Daley's central arguments – that rural social work practice requires the same kind of targeted cultural competence as any other kind of cross cultural social work practice. Pockets of rural culture may survive even in urban contexts, extending the relevance of this book for any social worker. Although rural practice may be more isolating and less specialized than urban work, deeper community involvement, stronger interpersonal relationships, and enhanced autonomy may be ample rewards to social workers focusing on rural people.

To understand rurality as a diversity issue requires Daley to walk a careful line in chapter two. Rural cultures do share general tendencies, but Daley also wanted to avoid stereotyping and oversimplifying the variability that exists. He finds a good balance when he describes how rural values are attached to the land, family, churches, schools, and informal helping networks. He suggests that rural people, in comparison to urban dwellers, prefer the personal in relationships and cherish community which can lead to greater openness in communication and greater respect for tradition. The mythology of self-reliance is often quite alive in rural areas. Acculturation to any rural community will be demonstrated by learning the language spoken, the outdoor nature of rural recreation, appreciating rural gun culture, and embracing the food, music, arts, and even folk remedies frequently practiced. Daley's picture of rurality is not rose-colored. He also mentions how closeness can fuel a basic distrust of outsiders, the complex influence past

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generations may have on one's reputation today, the dominance of hidden power structures in most rural communities, and the absence of diversity of employment opportunities.

In case the second chapter did not sufficiently address rural diversity, Daley certainly compensates for that with chapter three. His basic understanding is that social work practitioners cannot effectively practice without a clear understanding of the individual in context. When that context involves the intersection of rurality with race, aging, or sexual orientation, greater understanding is required. Daley specifically addressed African American, Hispanic, and Native Americans, showing not only that their rural presence is often dominant regionally, but also some of the unique challenges they face in rural areas. Heterosexism and religious opposition to alternative lifestyles can be a challenge for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people in rural areas; and the health concerns of rural elders contribute greatly to their service needs.

Having described the diverse service needs of rural peoples, Daley then moves on in chapter four to address rural social welfare policy. He understands social welfare policy as "an objective and standardized approach to a course of action designed to help those in need" (p. 105) which apparently conflicts with the personal relationships valued by rural peoples. Because most policies are established by outsiders who are unfamiliar with the local context, unintentional barriers to access for rural residents can be created. Requiring delivery of an application for services at a central, urban location or through an online system will leave many rural needs unfilled. Daley is especially critical of national policies that have a disparately negative effect on rural health care delivery such as lower fee for service rates in Medicare and Medicaid. The chapter closes with identification of organizations addressing rural policy issues such as the Rural Policy Research Institute and the need for action and advocacy to improve social welfare policy for rural areas.

The delivery of formal social welfare services in rural areas is challenged by access, availability, inadequate funding, scarcity of professional staff, and rural reluctance to embrace formal services. How these challenges are approached in the delivery of mental health, substance abuse, healthcare, child welfare, domestic violence, and immigration services are discussed in detail, but the themes tend to recur showing that distance, stigma, and increased costliness of rural service delivery present challenges.

In chapter six Daley confronts the rural mythic idyll by providing a short history of rural North America and the incipient rise of rural social welfare in Freedman's Bureau services for former slaves, Country Life Commission initiatives under Theodore Roosevelt, and the extensive increase in rural social welfare services that were funded by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in the 1930s. Interest in rural social welfare tended to wane and remain quiescent from the outset of the Second World War until the 1969 Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education that included a workshop entitled "Education for Social Work in Rural Settings." By 1976, the first edition of Leon Ginsberg's *Social Work in Rural Communities* was published and the National Rural Social Work Caucus began. Today, the Caucus' work continues with a summer National Institute each year and a new open-access online journal, *Contemporary Rural Social Work*, that help address the professional isolation of generalist social work practice in rural areas through a strength perspective that builds on community.

The tone changes a bit in chapters seven through nine with a more explicit practice focus. In chapter seven, Daley presents the Down-Home Model for rural social work practice that is a blend of practice theories. He combines problem solving theory, systems theory, the strengths perspective, and social exchange theory within a generalist model along with discussion of a specific case study to enhance the reader's understanding. The next chapter addresses professional ethics for rural practice. He uses the term *fishbowl* to emphasize the absence of anonymity that often accompanies rural living. Rural practitioners are provided specific advice for dealing with the unavoidability of dual relationships, the challenges associated with maintaining confidentiality, and the competency issues that may arise when other helping professionals are unavailable. The scarcity of consultation requires a degree of circumspection by rural practitioners that may not be required in urban contexts with regard to personal behaviors and anticipation of potential ethical conflicts which places a premium on preemptive informed consent and documentation of services. In chapter nine Daley describes practical implementation of his Down-Home Model and the personal characteristics that appear best suited for rural practice.

In the concluding chapter, Daley mulls over the possible future of rural communities and rural social work. His vision of rural life makes much of the hard work, honesty, and thrift often associated with rural peoples and sees much hope for these traits sustaining the resilience of communities threatened by globalization and agricultural policies that promote consolidation of agribusiness. Rural life is changing as Daley asserts, but one is left wondering whether he has understated the degree of change that has taken place. Iowa, after all, was one of the first states to legalize same-sex marriage. Telecommunications, television, and travel have improved substantially, eroding the isolation borne by distance. The fact that rural communities as a whole survive economically only because of redistribution of resources from urban areas makes their continuation potentially problematic.

Daley did not intend this book to be a critical analysis of rural social work, and it is not. Readers with a more critical orientation might find themselves asking many questions, but his intended audience of social work students and social workers preparing to work with rural people should begin their education here. This synthesis of the literature on rural social work is accessible for undergraduates and will provide a strong foundation to develop culturally sensitive practice with rural people.