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Book Review: Rural Social Work: An International Perspective

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Book Review

Rural Social Work: An International Perspective

Richard Pugh & Brian Cheers

2010

Bristol, UK: The Policy Press

254 pages

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Rural Social Work: An International Perspective is a modest attempt to survey the research on social work in rural areas in economically developed nations. It relies heavily on English-speaking countries and emphasizes rural diversity and models of practice in rural settings with the hope of developing rural practitioners. Pugh is a social work professor in the United Kingdom and Cheers teaches in Australia; accordingly, they clearly bring something of an international perspective in their review of rural social work.

A short introduction indicates the authors' preference for a focus on the social rather than demographic understanding of rurality, and their presumptions that rural social work practice is essentially generalist practice that embraces community development, local culture, and collaboration beyond social service institutions. Eight chapters divided into two sections follow. The first section of five chapters provides an overview of the experience of rurality. The second contains three chapters that address in turn, practice models focusing on the person, practice models focusing on the community, and rural social service workforce issues. There is an extensive 45-page bibliography with more than 600 sources cited, with almost a fourth of the sources dated between 2004 and 2010, indicating a high currency for a book published in 2010. All are in English. I did find it a bit troubling that Leon Ginsberg, a major figure in American rural social work, is cited a mere two times.

The first chapter is a sketch of the geographic, demographic, economic, political/structural, and community contexts for rural practice. Geography influences practice by limiting access due to remoteness, travel obstacles, and resource depletion. Rural-to-urban migration patterns are no longer the only story; however, rural aging and relocation away from rural areas for educational opportunities remain common. Racial and ethnic diversity varies significantly with many rural communities being dominated by a single group; minority communities experience economic deprivation almost universally. Mechanization of agriculture has significantly altered rural employment, and gender roles have shifted as farm households require female employment in service roles. The political and structural dynamics in support of rural communities varies significantly among developed nations, especially among the more centralized governments. Local and regional autonomy may be more supportive of rural services; however, the small size of rural institutions often stretch resources and force consolidation, which can reduce user and community participation in the structure and delivery of social services. Vertical integration with national priorities may enhance resources, but may also threaten the local sense of community and the shared sense of belonging. Pugh and Cheers

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conclude with three observations: (a) practitioners must understand the unique local context to serve a rural community; (b) rural practitioners must be sensitive to the changing economic and political context to avoid personalizing every problem facing a rural community; and (c) rural practice blends service to individuals with service to the community.

The social dimension of rural practice is addressed in the second chapter. High social visibility and social knowledge may lead to social pressures. Individuality must yield to communality to maintain social order. Often, conformity to traditional gendered roles cannot be avoided. One proves to be of this place through tacit norms of behavior that outsiders and newcomers will not know. Gossip and the related reputations springing from it weave a local uniqueness that the social worker must learn to grasp quickly in order to navigate the dual relationships and stigma associated with services. Professional detachment may be the ideal in urban settings, but is unlikely to be possible in a rural community.

Chapters three and four address indigenous peoples and other minorities, respectively. The attempt to cover the history of colonization and its effect on Australian Aboriginals, the Maori, Native Americans, Inuit, blacks, Roma and other traveling people, migrant workers, gay and lesbian groups, linguistic minorities, and refugees in only 51 pages is quite a task. Readers hoping for more depth are likely to be disappointed, and the authors' conclusions, that cultural relativism conflicts with universal human rights and that social workers must attend to other cultures and needs, is somewhat unsatisfying.

Despite a title that suggests problems and possibilities exist in rural practice, the fifth chapter focuses quite strongly on the deficiencies associated with rurality. Access to services is restricted by distance, rural attitudes toward self-reliance, higher service costs, and national funding formulas. Practitioners are challenged to cope with these obstacles by creatively engaging local resource partners that include other service agencies, informal support networks, volunteers, non-governmental agencies, and even organizations and institutions not directly involved in social services.

Chapter six begins the second part of the book by discussing models of personal social service delivery in a rural context. The point of service may be centralized or distributed; services may be delivered face-to-face or through media; and organizational structures may promote generalist practice or specialization. In the rural context, each of these is significantly influenced by time, distance, and low demand for specialized services. Visiting practice may have difficulty acquiring rural community acceptance, and community-embedded practice may be challenged by rural expectations of social reciprocity and inadequate boundaries structured to maintain confidentiality. Mandatory and statutory services may become particularly problematic.

Although the authors are careful to emphasize the personal-community links in rural practice, they do separate models for community work into a separate chapter. The emphasis in chapter seven is on social planning, "a goal-focused, data-driven process for identifying current social needs, anticipating future ones and developing and implementing plans to meet them" (p. 155). Community planning is envisioned even more broadly as it includes economic development and natural resource management. Case studies are provided to illustrate the social worker's role in these broader community development approaches.

The final chapter summarizes the scant literature on rural social workers, drawing on five short studies in Australia and the United States. Demographics, motivations, preparation, and adjustments to rural practice demands are briefly described. Workplace stress, worker retention, and suggestions for the educational preparation of rural social workers are presented.

The authors were insufficiently ambitious in writing this book. In a time when globalization is permeating every aspect of contemporary life, it is hard to imagine how an international perspective on rural social work would not include globalization's impact on agriculture, national economies, labor markets, and tourism. Refugees and immigration are mentioned on only two pages. Pugh and Cheers' international perspective is realized primarily in illustrations from a variety of countries, but there is little truly international in scope here. Any emphasis on rural social work is better than none, but this book could have been so much better.