

## **Social Work in Rural Areas: A Personal and Professional Challenge**

### **Abstract**

Australians live in diverse areas, city and country, coast and hinterland, desert and rainforest, urban and remote areas. While much social work practice is located in large population centres, providing a social work service in rural and remote areas is a challenging one. This article examines some of the issues for rural social workers practicing where networks are small and multi layered, anonymity, privacy and safety for the social worker cannot be guaranteed, and a broad range of knowledge and skills are demanded. As a profession, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of delivering an ethical, responsive and appropriate service in rural areas. For rural social workers, this challenge impacts in both their professional and personal roles.

**KEY WORDS:** Rural, confidentiality, visibility.

### **Rural Australia**

Close to 30% of Australia's population of 19 million, live and work in rural or remote areas (Commonwealth of Australia: 2000 p.8). While rurality is defined in many ways, studies confirm that in a wide range of social, health, education and economic indicators rural Australians face disadvantages when compared to urban Australians (Cheers 1992, Sjostedt 1993, Titulaer, Trickett and Bhatia 1997). While such disadvantages may vary between regions, in general, not only is their standard of health lower, they are more often hospitalised, death rates and hospitalisation from injury is higher, and they have poorer access to health services than those living in

metropolitan centres (Commonwealth of Australia: Report 2000 p.8). Education standards are generally poorer, and access to welfare services is often limited (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999). Incomes are lower and there is no doubt that rural Australians face complex social problems and social disadvantage (Alston 1992, Cheers 1992, Vinson 1999). Indigenous Australians, the majority of whom live in rural and remote areas, are among those most significantly disadvantaged (Cheers 1998, Trinidad 2001).

A further set of disadvantages is created for some groups through the effects of rural restructuring, recession and economic rationalisation (Sjostedt 1993). The advent of the technological age provides some hope in terms of access to information, however not all rural people have access and skills to capitalise on the provision of information technology. While some rural communities are thriving and have successfully adapted to change, many communities have experienced cut-backs in service provision, and have serious social and economic difficulties (Briskman and Lynn 1999, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999).

Recent elections in almost every Australian State have shown rural people to be unhappy with the urbo-centricity of policies. Rural politics are now a firm part of the national political agenda (Lockie 2000). Rural social workers can be key informants to these debates, and strong advocates for their communities. However, there are some dilemmas inherent in rural social work practice.

### **Rural Social Work Practice**

One of the purposes of publishing the Briskman and Lynn (1999) collection of articles on rural practice in Australia, was to demonstrate the distinctiveness of rural practice Briskman (1999 p.6). While all social work practice must be contextualised, a review of the literature regarding the nature of rural social work practice indicates the context impacts on the nature of professional practice in significant ways. These include the styles of practice, the impact on the professional of managing dual and multiple relationships, confidentiality, privacy and personal safety, and the challenges of providing accessible, ethical and competent practice in a climate of poor funding, geographical distance, and complex and multi-layered networks.

*The nature of rural communities, and the institutions, agencies and organisations operating in them, demand a relevant, appropriate form of practice, one which differs from the urban experience and is more than a diluted version of it. Difficulties can arise if workers attempt to apply a model which fails to recognise key characteristics of rural life.*

Francis and Henderson (1992 p.54)

Rural social practice has taken a generalist approach (Cheers 1998; Lynn 1990, 1993). As specialist services are few, rural social workers work across a range of methodologies and interventive strategies. A generalist approach is not only a mode of practice which incorporates different modalities, and requires workers to have the ability to work across different fields of practice, it also includes concepts of interconnectedness, mutuality and reciprocity, inter-relatedness and inter-dependence. Lynn(1990 p.17) adds that not only is a generalist approach appropriate to overcoming the lack of specialist services, it is also *most culturally compatible with*

*rural life*. Rural social workers must have an holistic focus, with a very diverse knowledge base spanning economics and politics, rural sociology and geography and knowledge of various interventive strategies. It is important to utilise knowledge gained from the community and its members, and to work in ways sensitive to the community. Practitioners need to be flexible, creative and able to improvise to provide services in locally relevant ways (Cheers 1998, Martinez-Brawley 2000, Sturmeay and Edwards 1991).

It is also important to acknowledge the myths and stereotypes that exist about rurality. There are visions of social care and harmony, and rural virtue which portray rural life as simple, slower and kindlier than urban life. On the other hand, there is a myth about conservatism, intolerance, suspicion of outsiders, homogeneity, prejudice and racism (Francis and Henderson 1992, Kapferer 1990). While elements of both aspects exist, to label all rural communities in such a way is as absurd as saying all urban people are cultured, tolerant and educated. Understanding the nature of each community is essential when contemplating living and working as a social worker within that community, as is knowing the myths each community holds about itself.

Martinez-Brawley (1982) provides us with basic tenets of effective rural practice. Firstly she argues the approach must be to work with the community *with* local people, in a respectful way, acknowledging local values, the knowledge base residing in the community, and that local people have as much control as is possible over decision making for their community: the indigenisation of practice. Secondly she refers to conscientisation, or consciousness raising. By gaining knowledge of systems

of government and public policies, ideologies that rule and shape our lives, and social control mechanisms, people can analyse community and social expectations, and better understand the processes that affect their lives. A further step from conscientisation is politicisation, so that once the inequities and inequalities in the existing power structure have been identified, a political process is engaged to address issues both within and external to rural communities. Such a radical approach, using concepts such as developing critical awareness and working for social change in anti oppressive ways, is challenging for all social workers. For those living and working in small rural communities, an approach using conscientisation and politicisation leads to greater visibility, and some unique personal and professional challenges.

### **Belonging To The Community In Which You Work**

There is a common usage of community work strategies by social workers in rural areas (Puckett and Frederico 1992, York, Denton, and Moran 1989). These studies demonstrated a range of different skills and role expectations exist between workers in rural and urban settings in essentially similar positions. Puckett and Frederico (1992) found that Australian rural social and welfare workers adopt a community focus, and engage more often in social planning, service co-ordination, community development, and networking than those employed in non rural areas.

Jacobsen (1980) believes that community development is the most appropriate process for rural practice as it can both work to improve resource development and also create fundamental social change, and the worker is seen as a *citizen* rather than

an *organiser*. This sense of belonging to the community, working with the community as a *citizen* goes some way to managing personal-professional boundaries. Sometimes it is possible to separate work situations from others. However there is often overlap, and such separations are often arbitrary. Rural social workers sometimes question whether they belong to a particular group, for example a town's development association, in their own right as citizens of the community, or as part of their work role. For community members such distinctions are often unimportant. However, this blurring of roles can cause dilemmas about role, the right of sharing information obtained in the worker's employment, the management of dual and multiple roles and other concerns.

There are many positives to working in rural communities, such as lifestyle, autonomy, and flexibility. There are opportunities for learning a wide variety of skills and practice modalities, developing managerial and consultancy skills, and initiating innovation (Lonne 1990, Lonne and Cheers 1999, Lynn 1990). As Riley (1999 p.193) notes, her range of skills *would have taken years to develop in the city due to lack of exposure*, and she comments that due to opportunity and the demand for generalist practice she was able to develop advanced skills and expertise in a much shorter time. However, belonging to the community in which you work can bring about additional strains. High visibility, dual and multiple roles, boundary 'overlap', confidentiality, personal privacy and safety are major issues which to be addressed for rural social workers.

### **Dual and Multiple Roles**

Dual and multiple roles must frequently be adopted, and must be managed within professional and personal contexts by rural social workers (Miller 1998, Wilson-Barrett and Dollard, 2000).

When working from a community development perspective, social workers may be on committees with clients, meet people “wearing different hats” and have access to a range of knowledge and information to which they would not otherwise be privy. For many urban workers, friendships or associations with clients, ex-clients, extended families of clients, members of boards of management etc would be considered unethical, but in the country it is impossible to join a sporting club, a creative arts group, or a school council without some compromise to this position. Martinez-Brawley (2000) comments that in many rural areas it would be impossible not to know a client, or know of a client in circumstances other than the professional work. She goes on to argue that this may add to the effectiveness of practice, and that codes of ethics for social workers must address this aspect of rural practice. Dual roles and multiple roles and relationships can create a humanising effect that is beneficial to both the worker and their clients and lead to better practice (Cheers 1998).

The National Association of Social Workers in America have recently amended their Code of Ethics (Martinez-Brawley 2000 p.254) to provide for greater sensitivity to complex situations arising from rural practice. They recognise that in rural practice some relationships are more easily avoidable than others, or are potentially more harmful than others, and recommend rural social workers discuss boundary issues clearly with clients, utilise supervision effectively, and address these matters within cultural, and ethical expectations.

Further research into the nature of dual and multiple relationships in rural practice would be a worthwhile study where assumptions about the “problems” or “benefits” of dual and multiple relationships and role blurring could be analysed.

### **Lack of Anonymity**

Lack of anonymity for the rural social worker, their family and their clients is an important factor to acknowledge in rural social work practice. Edwards (1993) argues for a low profile approach when setting up new services in an Australian small town, initially working on creating professional credibility rather than developing a high profile. However she acknowledges that the worker soon becomes highly visible in the community both within the networks of other professionals and power lobbies, and with clients. She tells of how she was shopping with her husband and young children, and three different clients approached to tell her of significant issues in their lives. In urban practice, this set of circumstances would be unlikely; in rural communities it is a fact of life for professionals.

*One has to develop appropriate ways to deal with this. It is inappropriate in my opinion to indicate, by whatever means, that you are not at work and therefore not responsive. On the other hand it is also inappropriate to conduct confidential discussions on the footpath just because someone runs into you. Another issue that can cause discomfort is that it may not be possible to sustain the image of a fully self realised being with the perfect family in the face of that screaming child in the supermarket, particularly when the offender happens to be your child who is throwing a major tantrum in front of your clients. Edwards (1993 p12)*

There are various ways professionals can deal with this situation, but as Edwards (1993) indicates, professional practice issues can emerge even on Saturdays, and appropriate strategies must be used to manage them. While being clear about your professional role, and the expectations of the relationship with clients is vital, social workers need to consider for themselves how best to manage these issues in their own community. A sense of balance and of being *a citizen* as well as a social worker (Jacobsen 1980), of seeing oneself as an active part of the community, may assist in dealing with these events.

Disturbing issues can occur when a rural social worker works to reduce oppression, discrimination and disadvantage in rural communities, using radical practice or Martinez-Brawley's (1982) approach. Working for social justice, and challenging oppression in rural areas can be more complex and dangerous than in urban environments because of the high visibility of workers. People who are most discriminated against may find it very difficult to demand their rights, or take social action for fear of further discrimination. The social workers who work with these client groups may also be fearful of consequences for themselves and their families (Pugh 2001). As part of their role, they may have to challenge dominant ideologies, remove children from families, help women escape family abuse, and challenge racist and oppressive practices. This may eventuate in unwelcome attention to themselves and their families, such as threats, violence or harassment in the community or at work. There can be enormous tension in undertaking such a role (Lynn 1999, Pugh 2001), and if powerful ideologies are challenged, a worker's future job prospects can

be damaged. Reprisals against the social worker and their family members can and do occur. Challenging the dominant view and supporting the politicisation process for marginalised groups when supervision and support from agencies may be minimal can make it difficult for workers to remain positive and optimistic (Briskman1995, Lynn1999).

In rural social work practice an individual can really make a difference, may be a strong role model for others, and may “break the silence” about important issues which the community must address. As social workers,

With strategies of empowerment and community development, social workers are in very powerful positions to create lasting change. However, there are times when working within a social action, anti-oppressive practice model may be risky, even dangerous, for the individual involved and their families, and more so for those in rural areas where lack of anonymity exists.

### **Confidentiality and Privacy**

Lack of anonymity also impacts on the way services must be delivered. In a study by Macklin (1995) clients reported concerns related to privacy and confidentiality associated with particular professional services. Many chose to go to other towns for services to avoid the “gossip and innuendo” they feared would result if they were seen to approach a local worker. Many also were worried that administrative staff, or others working at the agency would have access to personal records, and could not

necessarily be trusted. In their study of privacy and sexual health issues for young rural people, Warr and Hillier (1997) emphasised the need for services to be sensitively offered in ways that would ensure privacy and confidentiality. Care must be taken to provide a service that is, and is seen to be, scrupulous in the management of personal and private information.

For the social worker, ethical dilemmas can arise with the management of information gained indirectly as a result of living and working in the same community. Often information is obtained about a client's circumstances in informal settings, out of work hours and is sometimes sought or given by friends or family of the client. It is critical to develop strategies to deal with these situations and to consider the validity of receiving and using this information (Green and Mason 2002).

Social workers are often expected to share sensitive material with other workers or the community. Often social workers are privy to information the community feels it has a right to know, but cannot share due to professional ethics. An example might be a social worker working with a child sexual offender who has been released from prison and relocated to the community. If this person re-offends, the offences could involve the social worker's own family members or their friends and the issue becomes intensely personal. There are tensions about community "need or right to know" and professional confidentiality which can have a major impact on the individual social worker and their practice. If an offence occurs, friends may believe they should have been warned in some way, and members of the community retaliate for what they may see as practices which protect the perpetrator and not the community. For many

social workers this tension is constant. A possible strategy which protects the client's confidentiality but also goes some way to addressing community concerns is to be proactive with formulating community based educational strategies that prepare and alert rural communities to potential dangers.

### **Personal Safety Issues**

Staying safe as a worker and protecting your family's safety may be a concern as anonymity in rural areas cannot be ensured, and social workers often work in contentious fields such as child protection, family violence, the criminal justice system, and child and family welfare. Wilson-Barrett and Dollard (2000) discuss some of the complications of having professional knowledge about perpetrators of violence, and the need to protect vulnerable members of the worker's family such as children. Similar examples are given by Macklin (1995) where social workers acknowledged a fear of reporting suspected child abuse due to the possible retaliation by violent perpetrators. Horejesi and Garthwait (1994) identified that a high percentage of American rural child protection workers had experienced threats and violence. Ninety-seven percent of the surveyed child protection workers had encountered screaming or cursing by a client and ten percent had been pushed, shoved or hit by clients. One in eight reported being very fearful. In rural communities in Australia, figures may be similar, but few studies have examined this matter.

Sexual assault workers often work in rural locations where they know rapes have taken place, frequent the same social facilities, and live in the same communities with both survivors and perpetrators. This must have an impact and hypervigilance and

feelings of compromised personal and family safety may be an outcome. Coholic and Blackford (1999) in their study of vicarious trauma, found that there was additional stress for rural social workers who had to maintain confidentiality about perpetrators of abuse who lived in their community, and that their personal and leisure activities were frequently curtailed for reasons of safety and privacy. Rural social workers must have agency support, adequate supervision, and proper training to ensure they can practice competently, professionally, and securely in rural and remote locations.

### **Adaptation to Rural Practice**

People who begin their practice in rural areas come from a range of backgrounds, including some with experience of living in rural communities. While there are some notable regional Universities teaching rural aspects of social work, most social work courses are urban in nature, though some provide “rural electives”. While new graduates take up rural practice opportunities, not all new comers to rural practice are new graduates. Many have advanced skills and experience and relocate to rural practice for a variety of reasons including lifestyle and work opportunities.

There is some evidence that indicates relocating to rural practice may be initially disempowering despite a high level of training or experience, as workers must adapt to a new culture and establish their identity within a community (Sturmey and Edwards 1991). Even those moving from one community to another will find differences and have to take time to adapt to new circumstances and expectations. As it involves living in the community as well as working there, new social as well as work connections must be forged. Additional stresses are created as social workers

are confronted not only by professional challenges such as maintaining confidentiality and client privacy, but also their own adaptation to dual and multiple roles, blurred roles and lack of anonymity. Lonne (1990) examines the phases that a social worker, relocating to rural practice, progresses through as they make the personal and emotional adjustment necessary. He argues that this process commonly takes twelve to eighteen months, and includes disorientation, honeymoon, grief and loss, withdrawal and depression and reorganisation and adjustment phases. Adequate agency support, including preparation prior to commencement and effective supervision, need to be provided during this time.

Many rural social workers do not achieve successful integration into their chosen communities, and are dissatisfied with work arrangements. Lonne and Cheers (1999) found that many rural social workers left their employment much earlier than they had planned, and Puckett and Frederico (1992) also found that rural social workers seemed overall more concerned with their employment than their urban counterparts. Dollard, Winefield and Winefield's (1999) study of burnout and job satisfaction in rural and metropolitan social workers indicated that for rural workers, role ambiguity and unfair selection processes were important predictors of strain for rural workers. In these circumstances access to high level, supportive supervision may assist in retention and reduction of stress in rural social workers.

### **Supervision and Debriefing**

Rural social work is complex. For many social workers this is challenging and immensely satisfying, as local needs may be addressed in innovative and creative ways, and they can see the lasting effect of their work with individuals, families, and

in the community. Professional boundaries in organisations are often blurred, and roles are flexible which provides a range of professional opportunities and challenges. (Cheers 1998, Brand and Kesting 1999). For some rural social workers, this lack of role clarity becomes a constant source of stress (Dollard, Winefield and Winefield 1999).

Access to relevant and supportive supervision for rural professionals is imperative given the range of potential dilemmas discussed in this paper. Social workers in rural areas need to develop advanced skills, be creative and adaptive, and be able to effectively negotiate a range of personal, professional and practice demands. Support and professional supervision enhances the chances of the social worker integrating effectively into the community, and maintaining a credible and professional service. However, the density of networks in rural areas can affect the ability to confidently and confidentially debrief or utilise supervision.

Within the agency, the supervisor, as well as the social workers themselves, may have relationships with members of the community that can compromise a trusting and open supervisory relationship. Perhaps the supervisor may be friends with the client or their extended family, or part of the same or associated networks. The supervisor may be married to the director of an agency which the social worker may want to criticise. Maintaining confidentiality can be very complex. Social workers and their supervisors frequently will have other associations that impact on the ability to discuss sensitive and private material confidently. These networks must be taken into account as they do impact on the capacity to find and access supervision and

debriefing. It is necessary to honestly discuss these situations, and in some circumstances seek supervision outside the agency, or even the region.

### **Conclusion**

For social workers choosing to work in rural areas, the work has many positive benefits. Living and working in the community allows workers to be citizens as well as workers, provide vital services, contribute to community change and well being, and really “make a difference”. However, rural practice contains some professional challenges that must be acknowledged. Rural social work that confronts oppression, works with marginalised people, and takes a developmental and generalist approach requires a range of skills and the ability to analyse complex social, economic, structural and cultural factors. The effects of working in rural areas impact not only on the professional aspects of work, but on the person as well. The management of these personal and practice issues need to be addressed comprehensively by education, supervision and agency practices. For those in rural areas, the effect of their work is both dramatic and personal, and strategies for dealing with the consequences of this practice must be developed and shared.

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