

Chapter 12

Final Words – Social Work and Rural Communities – Reflections and Ways Forward

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Abstract

Chapter 12 by the editors, summarises the common issues emerging from the three themes of the book: stigma, environment and community, and two that are evident throughout the chapters: stories as data, and the pros and cons of the digital revolution. The innovative as well as well-versed ways of seeing the world and its issues that the contributors have outlined, are highlighted, offering as the book reaches a conclusion, further amplification of the notion of community as fundamental to rural social work practice.

Introduction

We hope readers with a rural interest and engagement have been stimulated by the chapters in these pages. We believe these offer not just a fresh perspective on themes covered in previous rural social work literature, but some new ones that are original and innovative. These, we believe, are crucial given concerns about climate change, sustainability and the post-COVID world we share. In this final chapter we highlight emerging themes from the book, outline some challenges for the future of social work in rural communities and finally some possibilities for consideration.

Whilst rural social work in the UK has been characterised generally by an absence of formal recognition, some of the problematic issues that emerge through the various chapters are reflective of a neoliberal managerial driven centralisation and emphasis on procedure, that has pervaded the profession for more than twenty years. It should be no surprise that in the UK such trends were bound to be universal – the uniformity that accompanied them ensured that different approaches to social work would be subsumed by ones considered tried and tested, that fitted prevailing agendas. These included the reduction of social work to a prime concern with the assessment of risk, a move away from generally supportive and preventative practice, and growing invisibility within communities.

Some of this, which was embedded in social work education, was welcomed by a beleaguered profession such as the move towards specialised practice. This turn away from the generic models that were celebrated in the international rural social work literature in the past, did not sit well with many rural practitioners (Turbett 2010). However, that ship has sailed, and specialised practice is now almost universal, although its application varies, and opportunity for approaches that are closer to communities will always be there, hence the focus throughout this book. Perhaps the tide is now turning: dissatisfaction with social work as practiced within statutory settings seems now to feature in most change agendas: there is a recognition that the profession is quite demoralised with a high turnover of staff, poor public image and a failure to stem the growing weight of intractable caseloads (Miller and Barrie 2022). Never ending austerity means that workers and their managers are expected to keep costs as low as possible. These factors are as applicable in rural settings as in urban ones in the UK. Our final chapter will focus on the major currents of the book and offer some thoughts for the future of rural social work.

Emerging Themes

The chapters in this book have all demonstrated in diverse ways, the original hypothesis in chapter 1 that social work in rural communities is different, and in our view constitutes a specialism worthy of more recognition than it currently receives. We broke this book up into thematic chapters so a review of emergent themes should follow that pathway:

Stigma

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 focus respectively on the worker's experience in settings where invisibility and anonymity are significant issues, the impact of problematic drug and alcohol use, and the experience of being a member of a marginalised and commonly discriminated against community. These are varied in content: from issues for workers and their families, to experience arising from a society that creates pressures that might lead to harmful dependency, to those who have simply been born into adversity. The commonality here is that in a small community, relationships are difficult to avoid, and judgements are made by one person about another that can be harmful. As we will see in other chapters the closeness and mutual dependency of a rural community can also be an asset.

For the worker, stigma and its effects in the sense described by Gillian Ritch (chapter 2) may not be an issue for a model of practice delivered from outside (as seems to increasingly to be the case whether or not this is due to distance and remoteness) but our contention is that real understanding of the dynamics of rurality should be based on community knowledge and networking that are best developed from within. This does not mean that the worker has to live in the community being looked after (a dispersed patch would make this an impossibility anyway), but it does mean they need to be immersed enough inside it to be a known source of support. The word *stigma* has negative associations, and many social workers will feel that this is something they carry wherever they work because of their role, or the role usually expected of them in statutory settings (as commented upon elsewhere in this chapter).

In a rural community the immersion described should work alongside a building of personal respect, a process that takes time and care (Pugh 2000, Turbett 2010). The outcome sought is one of a breakdown of stigmatic association and the building of positive relationships not just with individuals, but with communities, that are associated with care and support. This certainly resonates with the chapters in this book concerning actual practice on the ground (well exemplified in chapter 8 on working with people in outdoor spaces). That is an outcome we would want to emerge from this book – the development of practice styles and approaches that break down the undoubted stigma of social work.

Heather Still's chapter 3 on addiction issues in rural Scotland, discusses the experience of individuals who suffer and those who care for them: one beset with stigma that takes shape in denial, and consequent absence of supports. She also refers to "gossip" as a particularly negative feature of communities where there is little invisibility, a contributory factor to stigma. This is a theme discussed in the rural social work literature past and present (Cheers 1998, Pugh 2000, Daley 2021). Harmful gossip based on misinformation can be challenged if undertaken carefully without breaching confidentiality – a possibility if not a duty, requiring consent and negotiation (Martinez-Brawley 2000). The aim here, as in good social work generally, is to reduce stigma through systematic relationship-based interventions agreed with the person (or persons) at the centre.

Allison Hulmes and Peter Unwin provide a chapter (4) on some of the most maligned and mistreated communities in rural Britain – Travellers and Romanies. This is full of the impact of unwarranted stigma but based on long standing and, at least in the past, institutional prejudice and discrimination. The authors start by suggesting that these prejudices will almost certainly exist amongst social workers

and those others in officialdom who encounter these communities. As with the chapter on addiction issues, the authors highlight how idealised perceptions of rurality both conceal and reinforce stigma. Again, the role of the social worker in the rural community should be to support efforts to end the marginalisation that threatens different cultures generally, and the way in which prejudice is manifested in the treatment of individuals. This, as the authors insist in both chapters 3 and 4, should be based on awareness and understanding. The long-standing role of social work to be anti-discriminatory requires a special attention in the rural setting.

Environment

Cop-26 in Glasgow in November 2021 highlighted issues that urgently confront humanity. Sustainability is now a concept most people will have heard of even if its practice seems patchy on both an individual and institutional basis. This underlies chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Lena Dominelli's chapter 5 provides a globally inspired account of what she describes as *rurbanisation* – the introduction of urban land and housing practices into rural spaces that have eroded the landscape and damaged the natural environment. She argues passionately (and in tune with the environmentalists, and environmental disaster-victims whose voices were heard at Cop-26) that rural landscapes should be far more than playgrounds or escape avenues for urban dwellers. Social Workers she argues, have a role in advocating for the environment as they support those who fall foul of rurbanisation – she offers a model of green social work practice. Genericism suits such approaches and she contends, in keeping with the premise of this book, that such broadening of skills is found more readily in rural practice.

Writing from the perspective of a social worker living on a farm, Tina Laurie continues the green social work theme in chapter 6. As with other authors in the book, she separates the rural idyll from the actuality of living in a landscape, managed, for better or worse, by human beings. This touches on alcohol, food production, food poverty and the themes described in the previous chapter as rurbanisation. With a focus on practice, she examines how the landscape is full of possibilities for innovative strategies that tackle such issues alongside those who are left behind by agendas driven by the wealth and requirements of urban dwellers.

In contrast, Jane Pye's contribution in chapter 7 to this section, looks at the digital revolution in communication and how this can both help and hinder rural practice (a theme so significant in this book that we discuss it separately below). Such new ways of working involve a reframing of how we relate to the environment and how we might use digital technology to overcome issues of geography and distance. As mentioned in the two previous chapters, such innovation has allowed wealthy individuals with second homes to work in urban environments whilst enjoying rural beauty – pushing up house prices, gentrifying the countryside, and further marginalising the elderly, the young and others who are poor. The author focuses on the needs and requirements of the 'travelling practitioner' and how unfamiliar mediums might enhance practice and save on the wasteful use of resources. However, she is clear that we are still at a stage where inequalities of access and control prevent universal use, and that critical debates are yet to take place around the extension of digital technology. She contends, in line with themes running throughout the book, that relationships remain central to good social work, and that these are based on real rather than virtual contacts between people.

Chapter 8 offers a practitioner take on a project designed to use a natural rural environment to work with individuals and families in an imaginative way, using some of the community social work approaches discussed in chapter 1. Karin Eyben, a community worker, and Carla McLaughlin, a social

worker, provide a very personal account that describes their learning, as well as some first-hand witness from the people who were subject of their interventions. These examples are the sort of rural social work stories, rich in content, that offer a worthy substitute for the lack of formal research we, and other contributors, have identified elsewhere in the book (see below for further discussion on this cross-cutting theme).

Community

The final themed section of the book brings together very real practice issues for social work that are affected by rurality, and which we have grouped in chapters 9, 10 and 11 under the umbrella term 'community'.

The first of these, by Colin Turbett (chapter 9), concerns masculinity and patriarchy and their place in the shaping of rural communities. As with other content this is set against a background of the idealised rural idyll, a mask often for oppressive family relationships. These create a variety of adverse experiences, from domestic violence to mental health problems, that social workers may be required to address. Ingrained attitudes lead also to racism and homophobia – matters discussed in chapters 1 and 4. Whilst such issues are not unique to rural communities, they have been sustained by employment patterns and cultural traditions. As with other chapters, the generalist skills of the rural social worker are discussed in relation to tackling such issues. The personal behaviours of the worker might also be significant in settings where there is increased community scrutiny, again a theme echoed in chapter 2 and elsewhere in the book.

Chapter 10, by Becky Squires, takes a broad and considered look at how services are provided to disabled elderly people in rural communities, offering useful practice examples. Her view of the components of good relationship-based rural practice contains elements found elsewhere in the book and is based on a thorough understanding of the dynamics and possibilities within rural communities: local knowledge, social action, and cultural prejudice (in this case ageism). Becky Squires also confronts issues of professional misjudgement and avoidance, themes echoed in the other two chapters in this section. Becky also introduces the idea of social pedagogy as an approach that fits rural settings – indeed one of the principal practical theorists she quotes, Paulo Freire, undertook much of his work in rural areas of Brazil. She also discusses the social model of disability, a notion discussed in other chapters: contending that many of the issues social workers deal with are constructed from an interchange between society and environment.

Chapter 11, looking at sexual abuse in the rural context, continues the theme of harmful relationships that are often accepted as part of rural culture, and their potential to ruin lives. Sarah Nelson brings to this her long experience of examining this subject in detail, including her scrutiny of the remote rural Orkney events of the early 1990s. She (as with chapter 9) contends that the generalist skills found amongst rural social workers should help them overcome the fears of working in this difficult area. She also, and very usefully, details supports and methods grounded in research and experience, including facing up to the challenge of invisibility and denial of the issue – again a theme that resonates with other chapters. One subject not evident in Sarah Nelson's previous principal literature is that of the impact of digital technology on children and new risks to their welfare and safety – a matter of significance separately discussed in the next section.

Key Cross-Cutting Themes

Three themes are repeated across chapters and are worthy of key theme status in this book. The first of these concerns the refrain of absence of interest in rural social work in the UK sufficient to produce research – the significance of **Stories as Data**. This is not a new theme and mention is made of the

implications of missing out on the richness of rural life through narratives in chapter 10, quoting the work of Ginsberg (1998) and Pugh and Cheers (2010). The work of Cheers describing practice in rural Australia is full of such accounts that provide background and context to his practice suggestions (Cheers 1998). Other chapters offer strong evidence that rural practitioners have stories to tell that should be regarded as an evidence base for a rethink about service design and practice. Indeed this book arose, as explained in chapter 1, from the sharing of such stories amongst a group who came together in Scotland to create a current on rural social work. The idea that stories as data are of significance is a matter apparently unexplored in UK social work literature but does appear in a medical journal article (Bleakely 2005) and more general accounts of narrative methods in social research (Goodson et al 2012). Chapter 2 provides strong material about the experience of working and living in the same place (a common feature of working in remote settings) collected by a social worker from colleagues. We would suggest that the gathering of such narratives would form a useful basis for practitioner or post-graduate research, and in the process make an impact on the recognition of rural social work practice in the UK. The importance of such stories lies in the idea of *practice wisdom* discussed in the opening chapter – a factor in social work not unique to the rural context, but the evidence in this book suggests that its value can be found in the narratives of its actors.

The second recurrent theme flows from mentions of the impact of **Digital Technology** and the **Digital Revolution**, the particular subject of chapter 7. As Jane Pye's chapter 7 points out, whilst perhaps inevitable, the trend was accelerated by COVID and has forced workers to use digital communication mediums such as Zoom, MS Teams and WhatsApp, that were unfamiliar to many prior to March 2020. This was accompanied by forced working from home and reduction in office use, again a trend that was in increasing evidence over the preceding decade, and not always welcomed: a Guardian Newspaper and Social Work England survey in 2020 into work life balance for social workers, found that for many, stress levels had increased through the blurring of boundaries between work and family life, and the absence of collegial and supervisory support (Guardian Online 2020). For rural social workers, distance suddenly ceased to be the issue it had been: as Jane Pye suggests, this had obvious benefits, not least for time management. However, whilst the digital revolution has, for better or worse, introduced new ways of working, it has also brought changes in the communities in which we work. As Colin Turbett points out in chapter 9, they have to some extent, negated rural and urban difference. However they have also increased risks to the vulnerable and these are explored in some detail in Sarah Nelson's chapter 11 in relation to children. Whilst highlighting these risks, Sarah also locates possibilities for asset building utilising the strengths within rural communities, that might mitigate them – useful suggestions applicable to other vulnerable groups within rural communities. We have to remind ourselves, as Heather Still does in chapter 3, that new levels of disadvantage and inequality might occur through the fact that some cannot, and may never, use the new technologies – a matter to remain mindful of as we get caught up in the digital revolution.

The third recurrent theme throughout the book is that of **community** – a subject given prominence in the first chapter where we outlined *Community Social Work* as a model that addressed issues in a way that fitted with the multiple definitions and descriptions of rurality described. We believe that approaches to work that involve understanding of community is central to practice for individual rural practitioners, the services they work within, and those who determine policy at local and national level. Some aspects of this such as 'rural proofing' are discussed in the opening chapter.

How can we approach the dual task of both challenging the hegemony of individualisation in mainstream social work in the UK whilst raising awareness of how community social work offers something different? A realistic proposition here is that we have to find ways to work with the values and philosophy of CSW *within* the individual casework model that dominates social work practice

(Fenton 2019). This is not to be defeatist about the possibility of changing the entire way social work is practised in the UK, it is instead to recognise we have to be realistic. It seems to us that the most obvious place to start disrupting the dominant narrative of casework is in social work education. Dominelli (2007 p.35) calls for social work educators to be 'inspirational' within the context of what social work is now overwhelmingly framed to be. On a very basic level, social work qualifying programmes must cover rural social work and CSW to ensure that newly qualified social workers recognise the difference between working in rural and urban areas and how in rural settings, practice must involve communities. Educators must ensure student social workers understand the macro picture of social work so that they can critically locate individuals, families and groups within the broader structural factors that are impacting on their lives. This is courageous and complex but will result in ethical and effective practice. It could be that we also develop post qualifying programmes to support the understanding of this way of working for existing social work such as the post-graduate programme 'Social Work and Community Development Approaches' available in Northern Ireland (NISCC, 2022). One of the authors reflects often on a discussion with a manager in a local children's services setting in which the author privately acknowledged concerns about whether remaining focused on teaching aspirational social work was actually disadvantaging social work students because when they moved into qualified practice, they often found a culture of practice focused entirely on individuals and framed the problems these individuals faced as entirely their own. The response from the manager was remarkable; they passionately stated that once social work educators stop teaching from a perspective of what social work should be, we will experience the complete capitulation towards a neoliberal, managerial and oppressive profession.

Those of us working in education or who have any kind of influence must support others to understand that an individualised casework or case management approach is not the only model of social work practice and all social workers must be educated to understand how this model is shaped and influenced by political ideology (Dominelli 2007). Keeping CSW firmly on the agenda, even if in educational terms it is simply to serve to disrupt the hegemonic narrative around individualisation and pathologisation, is essential. Rural social workers are the natural leaders and experts in this area and should be invited into social work educational settings to share their knowledge, skills and expertise with students and social work researchers. Some suggest that it is the role of the academy to start the critical discussions that are needed when thinking through how we conceptualise social work (Higgins 2015) and the impact of politics on what social work becomes. Clearly (2018) proposes that a community of concerned people must come together to act in response to this and we would argue here that it is essential that people with expertise and experience in community approaches are included. This will inevitably mean the inclusion of locally focused rural social workers.

Final words

The various chapters in this book have offered proof that that rural social work practice is alive and well, and that beyond the urban settings that dominate in the UK, there are a vibrant ideas and experiences to place it firmly on the map and take it forward in all four nations. However, to foster its growth, macro-changes are required to practice and education across social work generally. There can be no doubt that social work education in the UK is an obvious place to include awareness raising about what community orientated practice (including community social work), which is fundamental to rural social work is and can be. However, there are thousands of social workers across the UK who are unlikely to have any firm connections to social work educational institutions. Student social workers all have to spend significant amounts of time in practice placement during their education and a much-heard comment from social work teams who are open to social work students joining them on placement is how students bring with them a freshness and new perspective into teams. Whilst not suggesting that students should be responsible for sharing and debating contemporary

thinking about social work practice, teams could harness students' thoughts and invite comment and thus gain access to what students have been taught and their thoughts about social work.

Realistically the workload and working conditions of many social workers mean that they have little opportunity and time for critical reflection about what social work actually is and could be. But, there are inspirational leaders and professional bodies in social work who can help us all as a profession to ask critical questions about the future of what ethical and effective practice looks like. There are also people within social work who can provide creative ideas for individuals who do feel dissatisfied with the direction of social work practice. For example, the work of Fenton (2019) provides ideas that are realistic and tangible for individuals to incorporate into their practice which enable them to work in a way that does acknowledge the wider issues in social work than just that of the individual. For example, focusing on building relationships, thinking critically and developing moral courage in practice (Fenton 2019). As social workers we all know the value of positive team culture and solidarity. These principles have allowed this edited collection to be developed through the coming together of people with a passion for rural social work practice: we have shared a commitment to build relationships with each other, to think critically when writing our chapters and have the courage to put on paper our views and beliefs about social work in rural settings. Through this we have demonstrated that it is possible to critically explore rural social work from a contemporary perspective and in doing so, prompt thinking about social work practice generally within the UK. We very much hope that others will do the same.

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Colin Turbett practised social work in a remote rural location in Scotland for many years and has written previously on this subject, and on community social work and radical social work themes.

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