

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Rurality and Rural Social Work

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Abstract

Chapter 1 by the editors, introduces the reader to the concept of the book: the rediscovery of rural social work and its place in a social work practice fit for the future. Describing rurality and definitions of rural social work practice from the literature, it moves onto an outline of the book's content and the reasons for breaking the contributions into three themes: *stigma*, *environment* and *community*. The last is premised as an overarching principle of the book – a suggestion that conscious rural social work is different from the use of models and practices that are offered elsewhere as universal because of their focus on the individual regardless of their place.

Why This Book – The Rediscovery of Rural Social Work

It is with a sense of great privilege that as editors of this book, we open this collection with a tale that exemplifies the possibilities of people who are geographically spread connecting over a shared passion. It seems the contributors to this book, people originally unknown to each other, were practising, researching, teaching and thinking about rurality and social work in their respective worlds. Individually, important questions were percolating about how recent events, new technologies and changing understandings could be impacting on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of rural places and rural lives. This group of dispersed people shared (and share) a view that 'rural' often seems to be a secondary thought when compared to 'urban' to those in power and associated policy makers. It is fair to say that in the UK, the concept of rural social work has struggled to gain real traction within the mainstream social work profession, and it has been left to a few dedicated scholars to produce work that those of us with a belief that rural practice is different to urban have poured over hungrily. It is perhaps no surprise that eventually a group of those committed to ideas of rural social work formed a network of jointly interested parties and through this network, the idea for this book was born. The role of digital technology should be acknowledged here – in fact this whole book has been organised through the use of technology demonstrating the power of these forms of communication for bringing together communities of people with a shared interest and passion.

The aim of this book is to re-visit and re-consider rural social work through a contemporary lens. It is addressed primarily to a UK audience – all the chapters cover issues that relate to UK legal frameworks and processes in a general sense but will be of interest to an international audience because of the universal commonalities of the profession. Indeed, much of the literature and research on rural social work emanates from the settler colonial societies of North America and Australasia – and that fact will be reflected in the references throughout the book. Within the UK there is also an underlying issue that with devolved government, each of the four jurisdictions (England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) set their own policy and legal frameworks. Whilst the welfare benefits (and state pensions) system is largely determined through the reserved powers of the UK Westminster Government, some aspects have been devolved in part, so differences are emerging here also. This is not the place to describe them in detail, but it is worth stating that this has taken all four in different directions which

will be reflected in some chapter content. The wider context of social work practice and education within which policies are laid out across the UK (with echoes internationally) are explored later in this chapter.

The book includes contributions from those who do not always have the chance to share their perspectives as social workers practising in rural settings. As such the writing styles are inevitably varied, ranging from authors with a strong academic base to others rooted in day-to-day practice, but whose contribution is no less rigorous in terms of quality and value to the reader. A key concept here is that of 'practice wisdom' – a term that crops up in several chapters of the book; our chosen contributors all exemplify learning based on experience as well as scholarly effort. Their experience grows from the interactions they make daily with all aspects of the rural environment, including those for whom they provide social work services. It is now recognised that this cautiously approached human skill is a highly developed attribute of effective social work (Cheung 2017). We would join others in contending that practice wisdom forms a core foundation of social work based on warm relationships, empathy and what Samson (2015) describes as a bridge between art and science.

We hope that this collection has resonance with practising social workers; our desire here was to prompt discussion and debates that are relevant to actual practice. As editors of this book, we are keen to state from the outset that there is no intention to criticise or cast negative assertions on anything or anyone associated with 'urban-ness', rather the aim is to re-invigorate discussion and debate about 'rural' in relation to social work.

What is rurality?

As editors we must acknowledge at this early stage that much of the literature cited in this and later chapters is Anglo-centric in the sense that it cannot be described as of universal application. We are very conscious that the situations and lives of most people in the world cannot be defined by UK, settler colonial or northern hemisphere experience. However, as the book is describing social work in rural areas in the UK we must proceed with our selective references on that basis and in that context.

Even a fleeting review of the vast array of available literature reveals very quickly that defining rural is difficult and contested. Somerville et al. (2015 p221, referencing Halfacree 2006) captures this complex picture:

“Rurality is concept, a category, a discourse, an organising architecture, a location and a material space dependent upon the unit of analysis used.”

Clearly, then, the term rural means many things to many people. According to the World Bank, in 2020, 44% of the global population was counted as rural and 16% of the UK's population described as rural (World Bank n.d.). Whilst this is a reduction from about 21% in 2000, 16% remains a significant amount of people deserving focus and ongoing consideration in what some would describe as an urban-centric or urbanised lens of UK governance and policy making (May et al 2020). This downward rural population trend in the UK is concerning due to its potential to reduce the influence of rural places in policy formation and creating uncertainties about opportunities and services available to an ever decreasing rural community (Nelson et al 2021).

Paying attention to rural places and their changing nature has important moral functions in terms of understanding people's experiences and opportunities and we would argue that considering the role of rurality is worthy and important in the fight for a socially just society. This edited collection is premised on this view and seeks to focus on the role of rurality in social work practice in the UK.

A shared understanding of what rural is, matters for planning, policy, practice and governance, and therefore ultimately how people living rurally experience their lives. However, defining rural is not so simple and globally there are clear differences as to how rural is conceptualised and defined (MacGregor-Fors and Vázquez 2020). There is an argument to be made that in trying to define rural, we create a false binary or dichotomy between rural and urban and in some ways set rural places out as being the 'poor cousins' to default thinking of urban being the standard. Such binaries can fail to adequately consider differences within different types of rural places (Gilbert et al 2016) and feeds into conceptualising rural as homogenous (Nelson et al 2021). It also fails to acknowledge the increasing 'blurring' of rural and urban (Woods 2009). Despite the concerns, applied ways of understanding rural and urban have persisted for understandably practical reasons. Attempts to define rural have tended to fall into two approaches, firstly one offering a way of describing rural based on quantitative features of a place. Measures such as settlement size, population density, nearest neighbour, accessibility, land-use and multivariate methods have all been used to try to describe urban and rural areas (Martin et al 2000 p.738). The descriptive measurements of rural has changed overtime in line with new thinking, technology and available data. The highly advanced techniques for using detailed data and complex use of many factors has elevated the practice of defining rural into one which seeks to capture the features of rural in its own right, not simply as that which is non-urban (Nelson et al 2021). Rurality is therefore defined in different ways for determining policy across the UK – reflecting wide-ranging geographical differences ranging from remote Scottish islands to villages within a short commuting distance from Central London. The Scottish Government's classification system looks at drive time from population centres and so at one extreme has a definition of a remote community that would be superfluous in rural England (2016). In England conversely, rurality is officially defined by population size within a defined range of communities (Gov.UK 2016).

The second method of defining rurality employs a socio-cultural approach valuing qualitative experiences to offer a perspective of what rural is and has been constructed to be (Shucksmith and Brown 2016). Although descriptive and observable definitions of rurality remain popular, they have been criticised for their lack of nuance and limitations in capturing the experiences of people living rurally (Nelson et al 2021). Despite socio-cultural approaches seemingly being able to offer a 'real' sense of rural life, the more objective measures have a significant impact on people living rurally. This is because it tends to be these that are used to categorise and assess rural places and their challenges, which, in turn influence the opportunities created through policy and practice (Curry and Webber 2012). The lack of consistent methods for defining rural even within a European context makes it difficult to comparatively analyse rural and/or import learning from one place to another. From the perspective of social services, this is likely to mean introducing policies and practices that have been successfully implemented for good in one rural context into another will be inappropriate (Manthorpe and Livsey 2009). Using the example of how poverty is understood in a specific rural location, Shortall (2013) explores how different knowledge is used to construct understandings and highlights how subjective knowledge can be used to support particular agendas which do not necessarily support understandings when more objective measures are used. Thus, methodology matters when we are trying to understand contested spaces such as 'rural' and researchers, academics, policy makers, practitioners and people living in rural areas must be open to challenging preconceptions through critical awareness. This demonstrates that perhaps investigations which combine approaches to how we understand rural are what is needed (Shortall and Brown 2019).

These challenges in defining rural, regardless of how creative we aim to be, arise from a normative view that something that we currently call 'rural' exists. Whether or not it is a definable entity is beyond the scope of this discussion but regardless, we do seem to be able to instinctively identify

areas as rural or urban (Woods 2009). Some scholars debate the influence of the 'mobilities turn', which recognises the flow and movement of all aspects of society including people, thus raising questions about the perceived bounded nature communities and places and explores the continuing importance of place for identity in light of these increasing mobilities (Savage 2010, referenced in Shucksmith 2012). Given the increased levels of movement and connection between societies in the context of ongoing globalisation, can we claim that specific rural places exist at all (Shucksmith 2012)? As we (hopefully) become better at considering the Earth as a whole, especially as we recognise the damage that humankind reaps on the natural environment (Robinson 2018) a further question is whether 'rural' is a term that should be reserved to describe only places which involve human activity or is it correct to continue to include areas of genuine wilderness (MacGregor-Fors and Vázquez 2020)? Despite some of these conceptual questions beginning to arise, we cannot get away from the fact that we currently do recognise some form of rural-urban split or continuum in the UK. With this in mind, the following section explores some of the features and important aspects of rural places that are particularly important for social work.

Rural places

As the nature of communities change in line with global events and social influences, rural places will experience these in comparatively different ways to urban areas as well as across different rural places (Kerrigan and de Lima 2023). It is essential to remember that rural does not equate to homogenous: communities in rural places, however defined, might be deprived, affluent, changing or stable (Martin et al 2000). The recently published State of Rural Services Report in England (Rural England 2021) indicates how differently rural communities responded to and coped with the global pandemic demonstrating the need for careful consideration of the differences and diversities within and between rural places – they are not all the same. Narratives capturing the 'rural idyll' remain, creating representations of all rural places as nostalgic, honourable and desirable, potentially masking the reality of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and exploitation in some rural communities (Shucksmith 2018). It is interesting to note that whilst ideas of community and care for others are thought to be the predominant values of rural places, these can be premised on discriminatory views about who can access the beneficial aspects of community – not everyone is likely to be welcomed 'in' (Shucksmith 2018). The closeness of some communities whilst on one hand being seen as supportive can, on the other, be experienced as harmful and judgemental (Somerville et al 2015). The enduring images of a romanticised rurality are likely to have been powerful in enabling the denial of a number of uncomfortable realities about rural settings. One of these is the lack of focus on racism in rural places – a theme explored later in this chapter. There is evidence that older people may be disadvantaged in terms of gaining access to required services in rural places (Scharf et al 2016) and the experiences of disabled people in rural places can be complicated and challenging (Morgan 2017). There is some evidence that when using objective measures, adults with an intellectual disability are less socially excluded in rural areas than urban. However, as the authors of this research note, these findings could change if more subjective measures were used (Nicholson and Cooper 2013). Even from this very limited discussion, strong evidence exists to indicate that rural places can be challenging places to live, and many people living there will experience some form of discrimination and oppression.

Deprivation is widely measured in the UK using Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The use of these area-based measures is devolved, and the measures used are slightly different between the four UK nations meaning that exact comparison is not possible. The IMD involves a ranking process to reveal geographical areas that are experiencing deprivation with the intention then that these areas are prioritised for support. In England, seven domains are used; income, employment, education, health,

crime, barriers to housing and living environment (Greig et al 2010). Such measures are not without criticism and assumptions about causes of deprivation should not be made from the IMD (Noble et al 2006). However, the general consensus appears to be that IMD provide a fairly accurate picture of areas deprivation in the UK, but that IMDs, with their urban-centric measures of deprivation, may fail to fully reveal the levels of deprivation in rural areas (Fecht et al 2018). This is because rural deprivation is unlikely to be accurately revealed by measures that are urban-based (Martin et al 2000). An example of this might be that rural measures are unlikely to identify levels of deprivation spread across sparsely populated wide areas whereas poor households in urban locations are often concentrated in pockets. Austerity measures have impacted dramatically on already deprived rural areas in England and Wales (May et al 2020) exacerbating inequalities following the financial crisis of 2008 (for example Black et al 2019). Poverty continues to receive more attention in urban places than rural for a variety of reasons. These include methodological challenges associated with measuring poverty amongst dispersed people and the relative hidden nature of rural poverty. Further, some continue to have difficulty in associating poverty with rural because of entrenched beliefs about the 'rural idyll' (May et al 2020 p.410). It is imperative then that there is appreciation of rural poverty, deprivation and social exclusion to avoid further compounding these issues through lack of awareness.

There are a number of benefits that those living rurally can experience such as a sense of community, access to the environment and lower crime rates. However, these exist alongside structural disadvantages associated with poverty and deprivation such as reduced opportunities for employment, education, access to public transport and health and services (Gilbert et al 2016). More recent thinking has included the lack of digital infrastructure in the concerns about structural disadvantage (Philip and Williams 2019). It is important to remember that some of these disadvantages create challenges for services trying to operate in rural areas as well as for those in need of the services (Manthorpe and Livsey 2009). The concept and practice of rural proofing exists to try to mitigate some of the challenges that policy makers have when trying to construct policy which is designed to benefit all. The approach harnesses the binary of urban-rural and in doing so perceives rural areas as ancillary to urban and in need of being in some way 'protected' or 'supported' via rural proofing (Sherry and Shortall 2019). Perhaps the urban-rural dichotomy could be used instead to acknowledge that in remote areas, service delivery simply costs more and what we need is a framework that acknowledges diversity and need within rural areas (Sherry and Shortall 2019). Ideas of communities having agency to manage their own assets and be resilient (Skerratt and Hall 2011) are relevant and interesting ways to consider how they could and can be inclusive and pro-active. However, ideas of community empowerment should be approached critically and include the recognition that they can serve to confirm the status quo of the already powerful in communities – as some people become more empowered, others can become disempowered (Skerratt and Steiner 2013).

Rural places have been subject to neoliberalism and this includes the commodification of the features of rural places (Higgins et al 2014). Research indicates that it is the physical aspects of rural places i.e. the landscape that appears to have the most value rather than the social aspects for people looking to belong in rural places (Shucksmith 2012). In some ways, this could be interpreted as opposite to the traditional ideas that the pull of rural communities is about the sense of community and neighbourliness that are said to be found there. Indeed, the literature that describes what migrants and minority ethnic groups are seeking emphasises social and relational aspects of community (Flynn and Kay 2017), so the research referred to, seems true of those who are able to exercise economic choices denied to less privileged groups, and not all incomers to rural areas. These people are described elsewhere as 'amenity migrants' whose aspirations and accompanying economic power threaten the sustainability of rural communities (Moss 2006). Such people move to the countryside

because of a perception of the lifestyle benefits it will bring (Bell and Jayne 2010) but this appears to be about access to the landscape rather than the sense of community on offer. Rural places have become places to consume the opportunities for leisure and tourism (Bell and Jayne 2010) and one of the authors is very familiar with an anecdotal local narrative that describes one of the UK's National Parks as a 'playground for the rich' rather than as a place for thriving cohesive communities. Rural areas can be seen as areas that are attractive for a particular kind of lifestyle associated with wellbeing measures.

The services that labour migrants require are predicted to become problematic post-Brexit: after the accession of Eastern European countries to the European Union in 2004 there was an influx of free moving migrants to rural areas who, often over-qualified, took up low paid employment in tourism related and social care sectors (de Lima and Wright 2009, McAreavey 2012). Brexit has reversed this process and created a labour crisis in rural areas (Scottish Government 2019). The UK Government announced in 2022 that asylum seeking migrants crossing the Channel 'illegally' in small boats, would be dispersed in greater numbers to rural areas (*Guardian* 16th November 2022). However, as many are prohibited from working in most cases, this may not immediately impact on rural employment deficits even setting aside considerations of social justice regarding compulsion and absence of choice.

Maybe rural districts should be measured in terms of contribution to wellbeing rather than economic productivity (Curry and Webber 2012), a move that would no doubt stimulate the consumption of rural places beyond what we already see. However, the focus on rural places as places for leisure and tourism has surely fuelled the serious problems with rural housing as only the wealthy can now afford to live in many rural areas because of the price of properties (Gallent et al 2019). As we observe and experience the changing nature of rural places, the concepts of *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society) as suggested by Tönnies (1855-1936) remain relevant and useful (Tilman 2004). Many rural places are struggling to hold on to their traditional community foundations, instead a more orchestrated functional approach to the creation of societies is taken. Whilst we can feel nostalgic and bemoan the shifting nature of rural places, many would benefit from progression, and many do maintain their unique and distinctive nature. It is this that requires a unique and distinctive approach to practise within them.

Social Justice, Diversity and Difference

Research evidence demonstrates that rural communities can be unwelcoming and indeed hostile to those perceived as 'others' (Shucksmith 2018). This is a process probably reinforced by political turbulence such as the UK's BREXIT referendum of 2016 (Neal et al 2021). Vital health and housing services fail to take account of ethnic diversity and can be difficult to access and use (de Lima 2008). Often attitudes are entrenched and developed from long lines of what are claimed to be traditional cultural values and a concern about 'outsiders' (Chakraborti 2010). The increased role of migrant workers in the rural food production industry, combined with the 'hostile environment' of UK immigration policy creates concerns that some of these essential workers may experience intolerance at best and blatant racism at worst (Stevens et al 2012, Moore 2013, Jones and Lever 2014). Writing in an American context, Hoffelmeyer (2021) explores the heteronormativity of rural spaces and highlights the discrimination that those face who do not fit with this stereotype experience, a factor explored in much more detail in Chapter 9 of this book. The UK might be smaller in size and distance, but this reflects the situation here too. Indeed, one of the authors can recall working in a remote community in the 1980s where it was not uncommon to hear that a reason for inward white migration was a wish to get away from the diversity found in cities. Since those times that particular community

has barely changed in terms of profile. This reflects the UK generally: in 2020 the UK Government reported that 96.8% of the rural population was 'white ethnic' compared with urban areas; ethnic diversity decreases the sparser the population of an area – 1.5% in those described as 'sparse' (Gov.UK 28th October 2021).

One might want to believe that things are changing for the better, but this is not how blackness is experienced in rural communities. Lemn Sissay, the Black Poet with lived experience of the care system as a child says: 'Growing up, I used to ask myself why everyone had such a big issue with the colour of my skin. Men would shield their women from me, bars would go quiet. The incendiary racism that is in the country is never challenged' (quoted in Cloke 2011 p.18). The *boundaries* movement of 2020 that followed the death in police custody of George Floyd in the USA, gave some expression to the lives of Black people in the British Countryside. Writing in the *Guardian Newspaper* in October of that year, Black musician VV Brown, documented what it feels like to stand out – the constant, innocently meant, but offensive questions about origins:

The daily micro-aggressions of country life are constant, and the anticipation of negative reactions to my presence has become tiresome." (*Guardian* October 2020).

Such comments should shake any belief that the countryside necessarily offers a haven from the pressures of urban life – clearly that depends on identity – and whiteness. Chapter 4 discussing Gypsies, Romani and Travellers, suggests that racism is not reserved for people of colour, and that this predates Black migration. Chapter 9 on masculinities looks at how difference is adversely experienced by LGBTQ+ people in what is a homophobic and patriarchal environment. All this suggests an embedded rural culture of heteronormativity, patriarchy and domination by individuals who share a common heritage.

This book stands in the anti-discriminatory tradition of social work, and all the chapters rest on a premise that the first step towards challenging racism, homophobia and cis normativity in rural life, is to acknowledge their presence and depth. Efforts to challenge the homogenous notion of rural communities are evident in the general literature of contemporary rurality (Philo 1992, Neal et al 2021). In the rural social work literature this is a point emphasised by Pugh in his discussion on how responses might be organised when determining the shape of rural services (Pugh 2011). The Department of Health propose a "Three R's" approach that takes in:

- the *recognition* of black and ethnic minorities and their diverse range of needs, aspirations and experiences;
- of *respect* for their right to appropriate and effective services;
- the aim of *relevant services*, to meet specific needs in culturally appropriate and accessible ways

(Quoted in Pugh 2011 p191)

This approach can be easily extended to LGBTQ+ communities and is in keeping with other themes in this book about understanding rural communities not just in terms of geography and distance, important though they are, but looking behind the scenery to understand how rural life is experienced.

The themes discussed here highlight the tensions of social work's place within the machinery of the state whose functions perpetuate the injustices the profession seeks to challenge and mitigate. This has been discussed in UK social work academic and practice circles since the 1970s (Bailey and Brake 1975, Turbett 2014), but has rarely been covered in the international rural social work literature – Collier (2006) being a notable exception. Both editors of this book are strongly aware of such considerations and keen that the book should reflect a social work practice that locates the personal

issues that social workers support people to address, within the context of community and society rather than individual pathology. This fits perfectly with the contextual specificity of rural social work, its concerns with the marginalised and disadvantaged of rural society, and with the model of community social work that is discussed in some detail in this and the final chapter.

What is Rural Social Work?

In offering a brief review of the international literature this section links to previous discussion in this introduction – social work in rural localities is defined by their individual characteristics. Importantly, this includes those strengths and weaknesses which are located in their history, networks and institutions, whether experienced positively or negatively. The literature agrees that social work service based on values of social justice and delivered through helping relationships, does not differ between urban and rural settings (e.g. Martinez-Brawley 2000; Pugh 2000, Lohmann and Lohmann 2005, Pugh and Cheers 2010, Turbett 2010, Ginsberg 2011). The difference is in the method of delivery. Our view as authors is that good social work is always rooted in community, and we recognise that neoliberal approaches have marginalised social work's potential and forced it to downstream to cost-driven attention to severe risk. This has led to over-specialised and siloed service delivery, especially in the public sector settings that dominate the profession in the UK. We would nail our colours to the mast that this approach is in dire need of reform in all social work settings – we urgently need to return to a community-based and accessible social work based on relationships rather than assessment models; to a practice that seeks to preventatively address the causes of family and personal dysfunction and distress, rather than just treat their symptoms (Turbett 2021).

There is a rich international literature of rural social work, but mostly quite dated and, as noted earlier, Anglo-centric. The more recent texts are careful to restrict coverage to a single country (e.g. Daley 2021, Maidment and Bay 2021). The reduction in output reflects the neoliberal and restrictive trends already referred to whereas the rural literature that was abundant in the final twenty years of the twentieth century, was international in outlook (if mainly restricted to the English-speaking settler colonial societies of North America and Australasia). This promoted the idea of *rural generalism*: a community-orientated form that took account also of the need to work across traditional service boundaries to find solutions to issues when there were no other services to refer on to. Martinez-Brawley (1982, 1984, 1990, 2000) was a powerful advocate of such approaches and although US based, she also wrote about the Western Isles in Scotland (1986), acknowledging that ideas about community social work had emanated from the UK. Martinez-Brawley also made a strong case for consideration of the work of Tönnies on community characteristics: (2000). Community social work approaches specific to practice in the USA were also promoted by Scales et al (2014).

Generalism was also described in successive editions of US texts by Ginsberg (up to the final fifth edition 2011), the Lohmanns (2005), and in Australia by Cheers (1998). Generalism goes back to the roots of social work in the USA: in 1933 Josephine Brown wrote about social work practice in the Mid-West of the USA where she describes an interface between effective individual assistance to farming families suffering in the Great Depression, with the community initiatives necessary to alleviate poverty. Whilst her book was not written from a radical standpoint and much of it has dated, there is much that has resonance almost a hundred years later when looking at issues under the surface of the scenery in our own rural communities. *Generalism* as used here must be differentiated from *genericism*: the latter refers to practice, once common in the UK, of working across specialisms: generalism does not exclude such practice but refers to the ability of the practitioner to draw upon a wide range of skills and strategies. This is usefully defined by Collier:

‘The generalist considers problem solving on many levels, across a spectrum of conceptual and practical approaches, and pursues any avenue that may be productive. It is not a specific approach, like casework with its theoretical bases. The generalist enters each situation ready to tackle an individual problem, a neighbourhood issue or a political contest.’

Collier 2006, pp.36-37.

The international literature is also strong on its examination of themes about the personal attributes and behaviours of the rural social worker. The detail is striking when compared with most general social work texts. Behaviours, not just in relation to work activity, but including habits in private life, are referred to as significant. Much of this focuses on the notion of ‘dual relationships’ - the management of situations where an individual can be a neighbour, service provider or even colleague, as well as a service user. Behaviours interpreted as out of keeping with the character of a rural community, were discouraged because they will lend themselves to a wider profile than would ever be the case in the anonymity of a city location. They might be shared between community members, and perhaps become barriers to relationship making and help. Some of this might seem unacceptably dated in its intent: we would never tolerate matching social workers to specifications laid down by the service user, as this could foster racist and other discriminatory behaviours. Matters have moved on, certainly in the UK, and most rural communities represent a diversity that might have been rarely encountered twenty or thirty years ago. Where diversity existed the pressures to conform and deny such differences were arguably stronger (Ageyman and Spooner 1997). One of the authors can recall a female colleague in the 1980s being advised by a locally born member of staff, on moving to a rural area, to use her husband’s surname and not, as had been her choice in the city, her own birth family name. It is unlikely that Ginsberg’s advice about integration into the community, in which he advises conventionality in terms of religious observance, dress and personal life, would be seen as acceptable or necessary today (2000). However, his advice about the need to not express polarising opinion or offence to established community ‘leaders’ until, at least, credibility has been established, seems just as relevant today. Here it is worth mentioning again the concept of ‘practice wisdom’ – an approach learned through the interactions between rural social workers and community members whom they commonly encounter (Cheung 2017).

The rural literature of the 1980s and 1990s discusses race and racism, and the need to counter discrimination, but not in the terms we might expect today; it is now understood that social justice must be located within post-colonial understanding and practice and an acceptance that white supremacy and hegemony are not simply associated with extreme opinions but rooted in state institutions. That all said, the need to recognise and uphold the rights of indigenous minorities (e.g., Australian Aborigines, or Canadian First Nations People) was championed by the rural social work movement and celebrated and reflected in its literature (Cheers 1998). However, this has not always led to changes in oppressive practices within the State locations of social work – a factor emphasised by Indigenous scholars within the settler colonial states (Derosier and Neckoway 2005). The notion that well-meaning interventions can be unintentionally harmful because of a lack of cultural awareness resonates down the years: this was discussed in the Marxist social worker Collier’s Canadian texts (three editions up to 2006). Issues of cultural awareness and its implications for practice apply also to incoming migrants to rural areas. The literature (e.g., Ginsberg 2000) sees migration through the prism of forced economic migration outwards to cities and rural depopulation. This might still be relevant, but now focus needs to be made on the widespread dispersal of migrants from across the world, some refugees escaping wars and climate change issues. As already discussed, other incomers (‘amenity migrants’) to some rural areas are at the other end of the economic spectrum – privileged people looking for beauty and quiet, but whose presence lends to housing

shortages, population imbalance and rising inequalities. These are all challenges for rural social workers.

Similarly, the literature tackles matters surrounding being Gay and Lesbian in rural communities (Martinez-Brawley 2000, Lohmann and Lohmann 2005), still of relevance today where peer pressure for conformity can lead to confusion and distress around identity issues. Discussions focus on isolation, feelings of difference, and social work in challenging rural environments where conservative religious belief is predominant. Other issues around challenges to cisnormativity, transgender identity and same sex parenting are not explored but need to be considered by the anti-discriminatory practitioner today.

Literature on rurally specific social work has been sparse in the UK: Pugh (2000, 2010) echoes themes of rural generalism in his work, and also looks at aspects of personal behaviour and common expectations in rural settings. This includes the aspect of 'placing': the need for users of services to have an idea of where the worker fits into the community they might both share (Pugh 2000). Pugh argues that this involves the disclosure of some personal information by the worker as an important element of relationship building.

One of this book's editors, Turbett (2010), developed Pugh's work and common themes in the international literature, to look at practice in the Scottish context, making a strong argument for a community orientation. Turbett had earlier (2004) linked a rurally remote, well publicised, and controversial incident (the Orkney case mentioned in chapters 9 and 11) involving child protection to the need for community-informed services. Coming at a time of managerially inspired and programmatic moves away from community orientation in social work practice in the UK, these arguments and ideas made little impact: practice models were becoming increasingly centralised, specialised and based on procedural models designed in urban settings (as found by Martinez-Brawley when she returned in 2011 to Scotland's Western Isles to revisit the scene of her 1986 paper). By the end of that decade this trend was being questioned because of increasing dissatisfaction with universally applied procedural models of service delivery in the UK, and a wish to return to relationship based social work. This resulted in a better reception for an IRISS Insight paper on rural practice in Scotland (Turbett 2019). This paper made a case for the rebirth of a rural social work knowledge base, and a celebration of rural practice.

A problematic area for social work generally in the UK in recent decades has been the notion of integration with health services through well-intentioned policy aims such as the improved co-ordination of services to an ageing population, and the better use of resources through avoidance of duplication. This has had consequences that have further marginalised social work and reduced its influence within services dominated by big budget health agendas. The crisis in social care which this policy has failed to successfully address has been a recurring feature of UK politics. In rural areas problems have been exacerbated by recruitment issues for social care staff, and resource scarcity and loss.

In his book *A Fortunate Man – The Story of a Country Doctor*, writer John Berger pens a portrait of Gloucestershire doctor in the 1960s who treats his patients based on his holistic knowledge of their whole lives, and not just their presenting symptoms when they attend his surgery. This is located in a trusting relationship with them as individuals and with the community as a whole entity. Good rural social work practice, as evidenced in the literature quoted, is based on the same premise. 'Landscapes can be deceptive.', says Berger, 'Sometimes a landscape seems less a setting for the for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place.' (ibid p.19). This reminds us that the 'rural idyll' can mask poverty, isolation and other social ills, but that

these will vary from one unique setting to another: 'when you've seen one rural community – you've seen one rural community!' (Lohman and Lohmann p.316).

Our description of rurality has highlighted the realities of rural life. The commonly experienced challenges these present for social workers occur across the international literature: resource scarcity, distance, isolation, personal safety factors, supervision problems for lone workers, and dual relationship issues. Nonetheless, practice in settings that are scenically inspiring, less hurried, and where networks are more obvious and therefore potentially accessible, are attractive and worth celebrating. The challenges open creative possibilities for the worker and team that might be hard to replicate in more complex urban settings. In the words of Lohmann and Lohmann: 'If you can practice effectively in rural America, it is likely you can practice anywhere because you will have learned to be resourceful and creative' (2005 p.317). This strong statement applies in our view, equally to UK settings, perhaps surprisingly to urban workers who are often led to believe that they are at the cutting edge of the profession. This is no accident considering that UK universities where research and academic papers are created, and where social workers are educated, are almost all in cities. The poor-country-cousin of social work epithet should be consigned to history! Several chapters of the book contain rich rural social work stories, a basis surely for qualitative research that could be more than an equal for the urban based research upon which universally applied models are often based.

Drawing on the literature, effective rural practice is built on the following:

- Generalist (including community and ecological methods of practice) social work approaches to building capacity and upstream responses to issues that that might produce downstream referrals. This might involve groupwork, community work and informal relationship building activity.
- The values of social justice, inclusivity and recognition of pluriversality.
- Strong local networking involving front line workers in different agencies e.g., health, education and police, alongside community activists.
- Opportunities to develop practice wisdom through experience gained over time, of a locality, its inhabitants and its networks.
- Opportunity to build understanding and knowledge of social issues affecting rural areas.
- Appreciation of dual relationships and public profile issues.
- Above all, good social work practice is good social work practice, whether found on a remote island or in a major conurbation – the difference is all contextual.

These findings, believed to be highly relevant to the UK, of course reflect their origins in the international literature, and so resonate with practice in the settler-colonial states in which they originate. That is why, we believe, this book and its original content, will be of interest beyond the UK.

Issues Arising from the Policy Context

In this introductory chapter the editors are keen to place rural social work within the context of social work practice as it has developed across the UK. We believe that a rural model is firmly located within an understanding of community and that this is clear from our brief run through of definitions and descriptions above that principally emerged from the settler-colonial societies of North America and Australasia.

Whilst rural social work in the UK has been characterised generally by an absence of formal recognition, some of the problematic issues that are discussed 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 upstream preventative practice, and growing invisibility within communities (Turbett 2021).

Some of this, which became embedded in social work education, was welcomed at the time 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, did not sit well with many rural practitioners (Turbett 2011). However, that ship has sailed, and specialised practice is now 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.

The importance of community and knowledge on the part of the practitioner of the community (or communities) found in a rural area, are highlighted throughout the chapters. This offers opportunity to discuss a particular social work approach: *Community Social Work* (CSW). CSW is not about delivering social work along lines usually found within statutory services, but simply located within communities (as opposed to the centralised delivery models that have spread in recent years – often for cost reasons) but constitutes a different approach altogether.

The issues that beset social work described above are promoting some self-reflection on the part of agencies and academics. Jane Fenton contends that many social work students are imbued with neoliberal individualistic ideas that are far from the social justice values assumed within the profession (Fenton 2019). If this is true, then they will take these values into the workplace and on up the rungs of the career ladder. The abandonment of traditional values of social justice and its promotion, might partly explain the poor and misunderstood state that social work finds itself in. The dissonance between what students read about in academic books, and actual practice, is bound to affect morale and confidence. A reversal of such trends requires social workers who recognise their role in challenging injustice and its effects, and do not believe that simply trying (often ineffectually) to treat its symptoms is what the job is all about.

CSW was much discussed in the 1980s at a time when social work in the UK saw immense growth as a profession, with generic services based in local offices. It reached its zenith with the Barclay Report (National Institute for Social Work 1982) and died in the ten years that followed because of an unsympathetic government and the predominance of individualistic ideologies reflected in policies that negated the role and concept of community (Turbett 2018).

So, what are the components of CSW? Elsewhere one of the authors has written the following which summarises the concept (quoted with permission):

- Community social work challenges the notion that the role of a social worker is to produce assessment and care plans, and gives primacy to work methods based on relationships and partnerships.
- It should not be regarded as a peripheral activity, but as a function of, and located within, mainstream frontline social work teams.
- Community social work recognises that early-intervention approaches can act to prevent the escalation of social problems to the point that statutory interventions become inevitable.
- As a driver of community development, community social work involves working together to tackle disadvantage, and networks that include community members and partner agencies.
- As a collective activity involving creativity and imagination, community social work is rewarding for practitioners and contributes to worker retention strategies and that avoid stress and burnout.
- Community social work is not prescriptive and so, while it can embrace, statutory duties of all types, is flexible and adaptive so that a response can be offered in crisis situations: whether within a family, a locality or in response to global catastrophe.
- Community social work is based on interventions determined through bottom-up rather than top-down initiatives, supported by enabling senior managers, based on local practice knowledge, understanding of strengths and weaknesses, and in partnership with communities.

(Turbett 2020)

Rural social work practice has always lent itself to a community orientation: this is reflected in its literature, and in the chapters in this book that reflect on practice. Some of this has been lost in recent years with the drive to procedurally driven uniformity and centralisation, but the revival of interest in rural social work has opened up considerations of what a practice might involve that was based around the individual characteristics and needs of a locality and the people who live within its boundaries, or who have some claim to feel it is also their community (we refer here to the subjects of Allison Hulme's and Peter Unwin's chapter 4 of this book rather than privileged second home owners!).

One of the most significant challenges that we have in social work is trying to answer the deceptively difficult question of 'what is social work?' There are broadly two ways of conceiving social work; one that involves an individualised casework approach and one that involves a wider community focused approach. This latter broad model includes the consideration of social structures, inequality, values flexibility and is preventative. Relationships and partnership are also considered key. An individualised casework approach depicts working with individuals, families and groups as the narrow focus of practice rather than working within and with communities in the way that CSW is described above. That is not to say that many social work practitioners working within an individualised casework model do not focus on the importance of relationships or want to work flexibly, it is more that the narrow casework approach makes this more difficult to achieve.

Burt (2022) outlines the early developments in social work including tracing a trajectory from its early roots in education to the dominance of individual casework that we see today. It is perhaps the case that the varied and variety of people and community organisations that were involved in the early versions of social work in the UK created a desire to professionalise what this activity was so it had an identity and could be defined. The origins of the move from the community focused activities towards a more individual casework orientation grew from this desire to professionalise. Education designed to develop social workers naturally fell in line with what social work was thought to be therefore further consolidating a belief in the casework model (Burt 2022). The revival of a more community-

based focus was seen in the 1970s which reflected the political ideology of the time. However, the political and economic shift towards neoliberalism arose in the 1980s and its influence was felt in social work with social workers being re-branded as case managers rather than people who worked directly alongside people and communities (Dominelli 2007). It is no surprise that the education of social workers followed this trend with the core areas of social work education being framed around this individualising agenda. Social work education takes place in a political and economic space and is subject to the pressures that the current right leaning ideologies bring (McCulloch and Taylor 2018). We shall discuss social work education in more detail below.

Research highlights how many now conceptualise social work in a narrow form as being about statutory work focused on risk, safeguarding and assessment rather than a wider perception which keeps a firm focus on relationships, ethics and social justice (Higgins 2015), the core aspects of CSW. As demonstrated throughout the chapters of this collection, this individualised approach does not always fit well within a rural context but is an approach that continues to be imposed on social work practice and practitioners. CSW has a different philosophy which is not only beneficial and appropriate in rural settings but could also be valuable in urban settings too. It has natural affinity with rural social work because of the inevitable need to consider communities when working rurally and we can learn much from our rurally based social work colleagues as a result. In some sense, because working with CSW principles is often the only way to ensure effective practice in rural settings, in rural contexts the view of what contemporary social work is has already had to be widened accordingly. As a result, there is some evidence that a realignment with CSW and the traditional value base of social work is already occurring in some rural settings (Pye et al 2020).

The questions about what social work is, what it should be and how is it best practised should not be seen as UK based only; these are international challenges too (Muñoz-Guzmán 2018). As mentioned earlier, some have declared that we are now facing a crisis in social work linked to what social work has become with problems in the recruitment of qualified practitioners, erosion of identity, lack of resources and high turnover of staff. Whilst dramatically framed, this dissatisfaction and serious concerns about social work sits in the context of the individualised casework approach. It seems timely to ask whether we can surface an approach to social work that sees practice as wider than the narrow, statutory function it has become which erodes creativity, imagination and the centring of social justice to practice, approaches that we believe are more likely to be happening under the radar in rural settings already. Given that there are benefits and advantages to a CSW approach, the question that remains is could we fully or at least partly implement a community-based approach to social work in the UK to try to re-establish a different and more fulfilling and effective approach to practice? Statutory work requires to be undertaken wherever and however it arises. However, we would contend that the committal of resources to the type of preventative, relationship-based CSW approach we advocate, might pay dividends in the long run. Chapter 8 offers an example from Northern Ireland where such a commitment has been made with the MDT (Multi-Disciplinary Team) initiative, basing social workers in GP Practices.

Regulation grew out of a desire to further professionalise social work. Although social work across the four nations has devolved regulatory regimes, the introduction of the degree in social work as the minimum qualifying standard has resulted in different standards and expectations in relation to the requirements on students, qualified social workers and educators (Parker 2020). There are similarities across the nations in, for example, what students are expected to demonstrate by the end of their qualifying programmes and what is expected of registered social workers in terms of conduct. Social work qualifying programmes are also required to involve people who use services (Goossen and Austin 2017) in a positive move that is an attempt to work in partnership with community members. However, there is very little evidence of students and qualified registered social workers needing to demonstrate an understanding of the different types of approaches to practice which would include

CSW and serve to highlight that individualised casework is an *approach* to practice, it is not the only way to practice.

Social work in Northern Ireland is regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council which sets out expectations about practice and education, as does Social Care Wales in the Welsh context. The social work regulator in Scotland is the Scottish Social Care Council who set the standards required for social work and education known as the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE). Social work in England has been regulated by Social Work England (SWE) since late 2019 when the regulation transferred from the generic Health and Social Care Council (HCPC). Since 2012, social work programmes in England have been heavily influenced by the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) now hosted by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW 2018). The PCF outlines capabilities across different domains at different stages of the social work journey and is felt to be a positive model in both academic and practice settings with its acknowledgement of the developmental nature of social work. A review of the regulatory expectations of social workers across the UK indicates that reference is made to the importance of community and communities if not directly to CSW. So, why is it that despite the regulatory and other guidance in place to outline the requirements of social workers to recognise and work with communities in the UK, do we continue to see the dominance of the casework or case management model in social work practice (Smith and Whyte 2008)? Perhaps this is because this aligns with the focus on statutory social work which has increased over recent years and serves to meet the needs of employers (Parker 2020) rather than communities. Further, statutory social work practice consolidates the current political ideology that individuals are responsible for their own situations in a time of austerity, an attitude much removed from social justice and community orientated practice (Parker 2020).

In much of the literature that claims to talk about UK based social work practice and education generally, very little space is given to any other perspective other than the English context. This of course may well reflect the level of concern that has grown about social work in England fuelled by the media and outspoken politicians in the face of high-profile deaths of children involved with social work services (Grant et al 2017). There has been what feels like a continuous focus on social work education in the UK with concerns about whether it is appropriately 'training' and educating social workers to be able to fulfil the complex social work which further fuels the undercurrent of blame being laid on social workers when an incident of a child being harmed or worse occurs. In recent times, we have seen the opening up of new ways into social work education in an English context (Hanley 2022) which many see as a symptom of the belief that traditional university-based programmes were not producing the 'right kind' of social workers. Research carried out across the UK in institutions that provide social work education programmes found that people involved with these programmes have grave concerns about the impact of neoliberal marketisation on social work education (Clearly 2018) indicating that despite the ongoing inconsistent view of what social work is, there are consistent concerns about the impact of the wider political context on social work education.

The perception of the social work role differs amongst people with an interest in social work education across the UK and as a consequence, the views about what social work education should be is also disputed. This was highlighted in 2014 with two high-profile reports on social work education, the Croisdale-Appleby (2014) and Narey (2014) reports. These reports had different origins with the Croisdale-Appleby report being commissioned by the Department of Health and the Narey report being commissioned to focus on children's services by the Department for Education. Despite their English origins, both are discussed as having a UK wide focus and Croisdale-Appleby (2014) explicitly states this intention within his report. Narey (2014) does not and the reports drew different conclusions about social work education. The Narey (2014) report suggested that social work education should develop specialist child focused social work practitioners which reflected a narrow view of what social work is along the lines of statutory child protection. The Croisdale-Appleby (2014)

report made a case for the continuation of generic social work qualifications and drew attention to the requirement for social workers to embrace a wide role encompassing the role of multiple factors in people's lives in recognition of the complex social situations that people find themselves in. This was an interesting set of events in social work education with two government commissioned reports reporting very differently about social work education and indeed, social work as a profession.

We outline all this in detail because we consider it important to locate the following chapters on different aspects of practice within context. If rural social work is to take its place as a focus of education and practice there are clearly challenges within existing UK structures that must be addressed. Our contention is that the community-based practice required to underpin rural social work approaches, needs to be built from the bottom up, but requires policy imperative and enabling employers and managers to achieve necessary change. It also needs to be co-produced with the communities it seeks to serve, a process that will only be effective if services are embedded within their networks and places.

The Content of the Book

In broad terms we have chosen the content and arranged the chapters to explore and develop commonalities from the existing literature, but within an evolving UK post-Covid context. We are also introducing new themes that have emerged in the age of digital communication, and concerns about climate change and sustainability. Our own networking has been enhanced by a group in Scotland established after the Rural Social Work Conference held under IRISS auspices in Dumfries in March 2020. This for us lends the book strength and applicability for readers engaged in practice, as well as those concerned with the study of rural services – a discipline we are keen to promote in terms of social work.

The book is divided into three thematic sections: *stigma*, *environment* and *community*. These are inevitably overlapping but suggest a method of viewing issues that we think is helpful to the reader. The first, **stigma**, concerns the impact of rural life on the individual and how this might shape the delivery of personal social work services. Stigma is commonly understood to be a process that underlies and reproduces structural and social inequality, intersecting with concepts such as racism and oppression, especially as it relates to the role of power (Goffman 1968). Our position is that stigma must be understood to be tackled successfully as a central part of the social work role in the rural setting where visibility is often high for groups affected. We begin by looking at vulnerabilities that might apply to the rural social worker: Gillian Ritch draws on the ample descriptions of dual relationships and their impact, and how these are experienced by her and colleagues in their island setting, and how they work their way through the issues that arise from living and working in the same place. Heather Still, who has research and practice experience in Scotland, will then examine how drug and alcohol issues are located and experienced in rural communities. This section ends with a study by social worker Allison Hulmes, and academic Peter Unwin, on social work with long-standing marginalised communities – Gypsies, Romani and Travellers; by an examination of these groups and their problems of recognition and acceptance in the UK, wider issues of rural racism are touched upon.

The second thematic section concerns **environment**. This starts with Professor Lena Dominelli's contribution connecting environmental concerns with the Covid-19 pandemic and imperatives that support a sustainable future for the planet. Some additional explanation is required about this chapter because it is less about rural social work practice than about the rural environment in a more

general sense. It therefore builds on the seminal work of Dominelli (2012) on Green Social Work, that is, social work which is framed through the understanding of the concept of environmental justice and its significance for communities. The editors feel it makes a necessary contribution to critical debates about why green activism might be considered important to community-based practice. Other chapters have mentioned the nature of the rural environment, culture and heritage, and its significance as a source of food, nurturing leisure opportunity and living space. These are all contentious issues but what the discussions all share is a belief that rural communities must be understood and conserved in a progressive way that serves their populations and which does not further inequality and oppression. Professor Dominelli provides an important analysis of such issues that underpins the objectives of the book.

This theme is continued by rural Scottish practitioner Tina Laurie: farming and agriculture play an important role in rural communities and changes in the past fifty years have introduced practices that are both wasteful and unhealthy; solutions are of interest to social workers because of their challenge to poverty and associated factors involving health and wellbeing. Geography and environment also affect the physical delivery of rural social work, and the widespread introduction of digital communication methods has changed service delivery – bringing both advantages and disadvantages, matters explored by Jane Pye in her chapter. The final chapter in this section, by Karin Eybin, a community worker, and Carla McLaughlin a social work practitioner, looks at an example of imaginative and creative use of the rural environment in a community forest project in rural Northern Ireland.

The third thematic section of the book looks at our fundamental premise for rural social work, the notion of **community**, and the challenges that rural characteristics can bring to practitioners across some specific client groups. This starts with a chapter by Colin Turbett on the neglected subject of masculinities and how they impact on the lives of men, women and children across rural communities. This is followed by a chapter by social worker and manager Becky Squires which concerns issues surrounding the effective community delivery of social work to older people in rural areas. At the other end of the age scale, Dr Sarah Nelson's chapter examines issues surrounding the protection and safeguarding of the UK's most vulnerable children in rural areas, and how we might ensure that geographic isolation does not equate to disadvantage.

The final chapter of the book examines emergent themes and brings community back to the fore as an overarching current within the book. Conclusions will be drawn from the chapters about a way forward for social work services in rural areas in the UK. A community focus, it is argued, whilst not a method exclusive to rural social work, should be seen as a methodology that can bring social work back to where it should be in all settings: it fits naturally with the characteristics of rural areas in the UK, and a transition to this is an entirely realistic objective.

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Colin Turbett practiced 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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