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Lack of Services in Rural Social Work: Ethical Issues and the Impact on Parenting

Judy Zimbelman

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Lack of Services in Rural Social Work: Ethical Issues, and the Impact on Parenting

By

Judy Zimbelman

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Abstract

The unique set of challenges in rural social work adds new dimensions to social work practice needs. Issues of poverty, substance abuse, and mental health issues are often ignored in the rural setting. The conceptual framework used in this banded dissertation is the ecological model, which applies the concept of systems to apply when working with individuals, families, and communities.

The first product, a conceptual paper, identifies the impact of the lack of services on parents and provides creative solutions to establishing resources for parents in rural areas. The number of professionals working in rural areas is limited, there is limited funding to provide services, and distance that impacts availability of services. The lack of available services leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported; this affects their ability to parent, which in turn affects children.

The second product presents research from a systemic analysis of ten articles. In the rural setting, ethical issues are unavoidable, creating dilemmas unique to rural social work practice. This systematic analysis aimed to assess the research on ethical issues identified in rural social work. Dual relationships, boundary issues, conflict of interest, and competency emerged as the main themes. The idea of managing rather than avoiding these ethical issues rather than avoidance of ethical issues in rural social work continued to rise to the surface in this research.

The third product provides an overview of the presentation entitled; “Creative Solutions for the Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas on Parenting Ability” was presented at the South Dakota National Association of Social Workers conference on 03/31/17. Creative solutions for establishing resources for parents in rural areas are crucial for the functioning of
parents. This presentation identifies the factors that impact the ability of parents to provide adequate parenting specific to rural life and presents creative solutions.

This banded dissertation pertains to social work with parents in rural areas. Identification of ethical issues when working with parents in rural areas impacts social work practice.
Dedication/Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my DSW cohort with whom I enjoyed sharing the journey. I look forward to seeing you out in the Social Work world. Dr. Robin Whitebird, my banded dissertation advisor kept me on track throughout this experience. Her straight-forward approach with me was exactly what I needed. I especially want to acknowledge Teresa Beadlescomb, Shannon Cassidy, and Lisa Borneman. Without the relationship we shared among us, I truly would not have finished this program. My dear late grandmother, Bertha Adrian Tieszen, an example of a strong woman and the backbone of the person I am today continues to inspire me. As she said in a letter addressed to me on 06/27/81, “My dearest Judy: We’re hoping its not to hard for you whatever you have to do, keep courage there’s brighter days ahead.” I hear her voice daily when I struggle to persevere. I acknowledge my parents who demonstrated the benefit of hard work. Lastly, I’m thankful for my husband, Peter, and my children; Oliver, Livie, and Jonah. This has been a difficult experience for us all and now I am finished. I look forward to us spending more time together.
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Lack of Services in Rural Social Work: Ethical Issues, and the Impact on Parenting

The focus of this banded dissertation is rural social work with a specific focus on parenting in rural areas. Rural social work has unique qualities, different from work with other populations. Although there are numerous issues to consider when working with families in the rural area, the common factor that makes it unique is the rural setting itself. Working with families in this setting requires a specific set of skills. Social work curricula often focuses on work in urban settings, and social work graduates often gravitate toward these settings rather than rural ones. For the future of families living in rural areas, it’s crucial to identify what makes the rural setting unique and to teach upcoming social workers the skills required to be effective in this setting.

According to Slovak, Sparks, and Hall (2011), who use social work’s professional framework of social justice and change, there is evidence that rural populations are an underserved and a vulnerable group, and that limited resources compound the problems. Additionally, limited attention is paid to this population, both in written journals and social work education programs. The lack of both resources and attention affects how well families function. The social needs of families in rural areas are often considered to be less than those of families in urban areas, but this is not necessarily the case. Poverty, for instance, is a strong risk factor for children and is often a significant issue in rural areas (Shaklee, 2012).

Ethical issues in social work are identified throughout the literature. A gap in the literature, however, is how to manage these ethical issues when they are unavoidable. Dual relationships, for example, are typically unavoidable in rural areas, yet the literature often calls for avoidance rather than providing techniques for managing these dual relationships.
Families in rural areas- particularly parents- are left with little support which impacts their children.

The cultural makeup of rural areas is changing and no longer are rural areas comprised only of one group. With these ongoing changes, professionals need to respond in ways equal to the needs of the community. Dual relationships, boundary issues, conflicts of interest, and competency are the ethical issues identified in product two of this dissertation. Responding to the ever-changing population in rural areas requires competency, one of the ethical issues identified. Therefore, social workers are called upon to remain vigilant in doing what is needed when working in rural areas.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used in this banded dissertation is the ecological model, which, in social work, applies the concept of systems to working with individuals, families, and communities- an appropriate fit for rural social work. “Because ecological theory emphasizes the interdependence of organism and environment, it is especially suitable as a metaphor for social work, given our historic commitment to the person-and-environment concept” (Gitterman & Germain, 2008, p. 51). The person-in-environment (PIE) concept, an important piece of ecological theory, is evident in rural social work. Instead of linear thinking, ecological thinking involves reciprocity of person and environment. As social workers work with families, the focus is on the attributing factors and not only on cause and effect. Environmental factors, school and church influence, workplace and health concerns, as well as family involvement are all considered when working with individuals, families, and groups in the rural setting. The ecological model views the relationship between the person and environment as inseparable. A change in one system creates a change in the other.
PIE highlights the importance of evaluating people where they live. Using PIE when working with rural populations provides an opportunity to identify the specific stressors that affect a person and of equal importance-the support systems in an individual’s life. Taking into account social, economic, political, communal, historical, religious, physical, cultural, and family connections when assessing a person and how they function in the rural setting is crucial when developing plans.

Systems theory can be used in tandem with PIE when assessing needs specific to the rural environment. Helping individuals from a systems theory approach means that individual problems are not seen as solely the responsibility of the individual, but are rather seen in context of the organizations, families, churches, schools, and other systems affecting that individual in the rural setting.

The ecological model is comprised of the person and the environment, along with the micro, mezzo, and macro approaches, and the model’s basic proposition start with these properties when conceptualizing a problem. One proposition of this model is that negative relationships between person and environment result in stress for individuals. Identifying the source of stress within one of the above systems helps social workers create a focused plan for the individual. If a life stressor can be perceived as a challenge, the individual will need less intervention. Culture, past experiences, personal strength, personality, and availability of resources all play a role in how a person approaches an issue. (Gitterman, 2008). The application of ecological theory when considering the impact of availability of resources on people in rural settings seems a good fit.

Parents do not function in a vacuum, but need support in order to be healthy functioning parents. The ecological model implies that all the systems in an environment must be considered
when evaluating a family and that without considering the impact of one part of the system on the rest, information is lost. It is difficult to properly evaluate parenting ability without taking all the systems into account. “Ecological thinking focuses on the reciprocity of person-environment exchanges, in which each shapes and influences the other over time” (Gitterman & Germain 2008, p. 53). When considering the numerous systems involved in the rural setting, ecological theory fits well.

Ecological theory considers resilience and protective factors, which include biological, psychological, and or environmental processes that help prevent a stressor or lessen its impact. According to Gitterman and Germain (2008) some individuals collapse from the pressures, while others seem to thrive. Therefore, developing resiliency in the face of life stressors is crucial. By anticipating these events and predicting stressors, social workers can help families and individuals. Protective factors such as temperament, family patterns, external support, and humor should be considered when evaluating a person’s ability to be resilient.

**Summary of Scholarship Products**

This banded dissertation has three products. The first product is a conceptual paper that describes what we know about resources available in the rural setting, identifies the impact of lack of services on parents, and provides creative solutions to establishing resources for parents in rural areas. The number of professionals working in rural areas is limited, there is limited funding to provide services, and distance impacts the availability of services. The lack of available counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, domestic violence treatment, and other necessary interventions leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported; this affects their ability to parent, which in turn affects children. A critique of the literature is
conducted in this review. The focus of this paper is on the availability and consequences of a lack of resources.

Rural populations are often not seen as vulnerable, and little attention is paid to the poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues, physical health issues, and lack of resources faced by these populations. This review includes key areas in which the lack of resources in the rural setting affects the ability to provide parenting-areas which have implications for future practice and research. This paper serves to inform the research completed in the second project.

The second product of the banded dissertation is a systematic analysis of the research on ethical issues in rural social work, identifying ten articles for review. Ratings in three categories focused on identification of a clear question, clarity and useful information, and explanation of findings. Results of this systematic analysis demonstrate the need for inclusion of ethical rural practice in the social work curriculum as well as the need for additional research in ethical rural practice.

The third product is a presentation of the conceptual paper given at the South Dakota National Social Work conference. This presentation included information from the conceptual paper, and presented creative solutions for addressing the issue of limited resources available in rural areas.

**Discussion**

Social work in rural areas faces many changes both for families and for the social workers who serve them. Ethical issues in social work are often thought of as being applicable primarily to urban areas. The ethical issues in rural social work impacting the parenting and families continues to grow, yet there is little action towards change to assist these families. The ethical issues defined in product two of this dissertation do not end with definition only.
Avoiding dual relationships in rural social work is not possible; therefore, solutions are required to manage dual relationships. The lack of services demands solutions, not simply acknowledgement. Social workers need to be innovative when working in rural areas in order to identify methods of providing services.

The audience for the presentation in Product 3 had strong emotions about social work in rural areas, illustrating the deep concern they have for families in rural areas. They identified the increasing segregation between rural and urban area which creates more difficulty in securing resources for families. The lack of services for families impacts children and the functioning of parents and the division between urban and rural areas has implications for the politics and culture of our times.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

The inclusion of rural social work in the social work curriculum is important for the future of social work education, and the identification of creative solutions to working in rural areas is crucial for ongoing rural social work. Including rural social work in the curriculum results in social workers being placed in rural social work for field opportunities, and using technology and collaboration in providing field social work supervision creates field opportunities not otherwise experienced. The ethical issues identified in Product 2 demonstrate the importance of responding to dual relationships in rural areas, and of creating opportunities to provide services in these areas.

The presentation included opportunities in rural areas to “grow” young social workers in rural areas, and to provide supervision for social work students. Social work educators attending the presentation discussed the importance of providing these opportunities and ways to identify options. Field experiences not only introduce students to rural social work, but give them time to
relate this work to concepts learned through the curriculum. Often, the challenge of field experiences is identifying social work supervisors. Creating innovative methods for providing supervision would improve the likelihood of student placement in rural areas. Technology, for instance, provides opportunities for field supervision that could not previously be used, and the various forms of face-to-face supervision using technology make a difference in students’ experience of support. An additional approach is to use a task supervisor in conjunction with a social work supervisor; this is an example of collaboration, a tried-and-true skill in social work.

Identifying the different approaches appropriate to urban versus rural areas better prepares social work students—many of whom will go on to work in rural contexts—for professional careers. With this knowledge, they can make informed decisions regarding rural practice.

An additional area of focus in rural social work issues is that of cultural concerns. Rural areas are comprised of diverse populations. The need for cultural competency, a crucial aspect of social work, is evident in rural social work, and demands ongoing teaching and identification of specific cultural aspects unique to the rural population. Addressing cultural competency through trainings and workshops is important for ongoing effective social work practice.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future research in rural social work is crucial for advancing collaboration with people in rural areas, solving issues related to the lack of resources, and providing support for effective parenting. Although the presentation was specific to South Dakota, it is pertinent to rural areas in general. Simply acknowledging the problem of limited resources in rural areas is not enough.

The identification of common ethical issues in social work is an important start in establishing better practice in rural areas. Alternative methods of ethical practice involving dual
relationships need more research. Social workers providing services in rural areas are often isolated, and face major ethical issues of dual relationships, competence, boundaries, and conflict of interest. Studies related to this topic suggest additional ethics training and more attention being paid toward identifying creative approaches to working in rural areas. This is particularly timely in that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recently (2017) published a revision to its Code of Ethics, the first since 2008.

This banded dissertation in rural social work was completed with the goal of influencing others to identify and make positive changes in the practice of social work in rural areas. The presentation was crucial for meeting that goal. More scholarly contribution is needed, and presentations on this topic contribute to the advancement of rural social work.
Comprehensive Reference List


The Impact of Limited Services in Rural Areas on Parenting Ability

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Abstract

Resources for families and parents in rural areas are often scarce, impacting the functioning of parents. This conceptual article will identify the impact of lack of services on parents and provide creative solutions to establishing resources for parents in rural areas. Services in these areas are limited by distance, funding, and the small number of available professionals. The lack of available counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, domestic violence treatment, and other necessary interventions leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported, affecting their ability to parent and in turn affecting children themselves. Although research exists on the limited resources available in rural areas, there is little research on the impact of scarce resources for rural families.

Keywords: rural social work, dual relationship, rural practice, parenting
The Impact on Parenting Ability of Limited Services in Rural Areas

Many parents living in isolated rural areas are trying to cope with domestic violence, addiction, mental illness, and parenting issues and are doing so on their own. The limited services available to those living in rural areas impacts their ability to provide adequate parenting. In addition, families living in these areas must often deal with changes in available services due to shifts in funding and the decisions of professionals to leave for other positions (Shaklee, Bigbe, & Wall, 2012; Riebschleger 2007). Social workers believe it is imperative for families to have consistent access to services; which support effective parenting, and that a lack of such services puts rural families at risk.

Residents in rural areas struggle not only with accessing resources, but often with increased mental health concerns. Ginsberg (2011) describe higher levels of depression, substance abuse, domestic violence, incest, and child abuse in rural settings. Additionally, Ginsberg notes that women face an increased risk of abuse as well as increased isolation, economic instability, and lack of childcare support.

Belager, Price-Mayo, and Espinosa (2007) acknowledge the limited research related to rural child welfare. Although there has been some discussion of the scarcity of resources available in the rural setting, there is little written about the specifics of how the lack of resources affects the parenting ability of parents, identifying needed services and solutions would be helpful for parents. Some factors that impact lack of services in rural areas could also be true for urban areas, although the totality of the factors impacting rural life can create additional difficulties for parents.
Theoretical Framework

This discussion of the impact on parenting of limited services in rural areas, and of the need for increased services, will be presented through the lens of the ecological model. The concept of systems in ecological theory is particularly relevant in rural settings. As social workers, we understand how individuals, families, and communities are interrelated and how one cannot be considered without acknowledging its impact on the others (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). The ecological model views the relationship between the person and environment as inseparable—a crucial concept in rural social work. It advocates a change in the system itself, rather than a change in the individual. In terms of parenting, this concept focuses on a positive change in the system, which in turn creates a positive change in the ability to parent. Parents’ ability to parent, relevant for work with families living in a rural setting. Using the ecological model for assessment provides an opportunity to identify the full range of influences on a child (Hess & Howard, 1981). The systems in the life of the parent not only impact parenting but cannot be separated from the person. The role of the school, church, family, friends, and community members in the parents’ life is crucial when considering parenting and this is especially true in the rural community. Operating from a strengths-based perspective, and with this ecological lens, this paper will offer creative solutions to address the problem of limited available services in rural areas.

Purpose of Article

Using an ecological framework, this conceptual article examines the limited services available to parents living in rural areas across the U.S., and their impact on children. It then presents solutions and recommendations, which could benefit future social workers employed in rural communities. As social workers, we advocate for acknowledging and understanding the
diversity and the specific characteristics of the rural culture. It is essential to acknowledge the diversity of rural people (Ginsburg 2011).

**Literature Review**

There are numerous factors that impact the ability of parents to provide adequate parenting. Although some of the factors can also be true for urban life, each of the following factors apply to rural life.

**Limited Practitioners and Dual Relationships**

Employment and retention of social workers willing to work in rural areas are challenging (Aguiniga, Madden, Faulkner, & Salehin, 2013; Shaklee et al., 2012). Mackie and Lips (2010) describe the shift in the U.S. to a more urban demographic which has impacted the ability to find social workers willing to work in rural areas. As the focus moved to urban social work, the hiring and retention of social workers in the rural setting grew even more problematic. Rural social work does not receive appropriate attention in the literature nor in educational settings, which affects both the knowledge base of rural social workers and their job retention (Sidell, et al., 2006).

In addition, professionals working in rural areas are often faced with dual relationship, providing services to people they know personally. In order to provide services, social workers often live in the same area where they are managing dual relationships. Dual relationships are frowned upon in professional practice, although in rural areas they are unavoidable. Residents are faced with choosing to go without services or using the services that are available. Rural social workers have accepted that dual relationships cannot be avoided (Piche, 2015; Pugh, 2007).
Poverty and Other Problems

Social workers working in rural areas need to address an array of other dilemmas as well. They need to understand the culture of the rural population, in addition to working with minority populations that include immigrants, Blacks, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups (Mackie 2007). Poverty in rural areas is a prevalent issue across cultures.

Rural areas are often the poorest in the country. As noted by Cochran et al., (2002), “Few people realize that 18 of the 50 poorest counties in the nation are in Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota” (p. 838). The poverty rates in rural farm counties in South Dakota are 111% higher than in metropolitan counties. In the U.S., more than 500 rural counties are defined as “persistently poor”—having poverty rates that have exceeded 20 percent since 1960. Thirty-seven of these counties (in the South, Southwest, and South Dakota) had child poverty rates of approximately 45 percent in 1999, (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005). The impact of poverty on minorities is most often depicted in urban areas, but in actuality, poverty, among Blacks and Hispanics is higher in rural areas, (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005). As described by Lewis et al. (2013), most high poverty counties are in rural areas. America’s poverty areas tend to be comprised by minorities; Blacks in the south, Native Americans in the Dakotas or Southwest, and Hispanics in the border states.

The impact of income on mental health is a concern in rural areas. In a study considering how family income impacted parental depression, lower income was associated with higher levels of parental depressive symptoms, which was related to disruptive parenting (Lee, Anderson, Horowitz, & August, 2009). More study is needed to understand how parenting abilities are impacted by lack of available services to treat depression. Poverty clearly impacts the mental health of people living in rural areas. The dearth of adequate health services impacts
parents’ ability to provide adequate parenting especially among women who often bear the brunt of the parenting responsibility.

**Effects on Women**

Considering the effects of rural life on women is particularly important when evaluating the impact on parenting. Because women are often the primary caregivers to children, their functioning directly impacts the children in their care. Compared to those in urban areas, women in rural areas experience a higher prevalence of chronic diseases, and with insufficient preventive care, diseases are often not diagnosed until their later stages. Whether due to lack of awareness or to stigma, the mental health needs of rural women are frequently left unmet. Rural women are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Wigington-Bice, Simmons, & Huddleston-Casas, 2015). Wigington et al. (2015) notes how the lack of access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities related to rural poverty affects all the residents. Ultimately rural low-income women are impacted by their status as rural residents in addition to the challenges they endure as a result of their low socio-economic status.

Domestic violence is also a relevant topic when considering how a lack of services affects women. There are unique challenges to addressing domestic violence issues in rural areas. Although it is unclear if rates are higher in these areas, certainly the availability of resources affects treatment for both survivors and perpetrators. According to Ginsburg (2011), limited access to professionals, lack of transportation, and high rates of poverty impact treatment.

**Lack of Services**

Mental health issues in rural areas often are met with limited resources. Depression is prevalent in low-income communities and is a particular problem among rural women. The lack of emotional support, counseling resources, parenting classes, and similar services leaves parents
in rural areas feeling isolated. Lee et al., (2009) identify how the lack of social support for parents can lead to depression, causing parents to struggle to provide adequate parenting. Children are impacted when there are not adequate mental health services for parents.

Locating resources is not the only hurdle in rural areas; it is also crucial to find transportation, (Healy, 2003). Fletcher, Garasky, Jensen, and Nielsen (2010) note the need for creativity in reaching appointments, with respondents often relying on friends and relatives. The lack of reliable transportation impacted their ability to identify and then access resources. This problem continues to grow; with social service funding decreasing, geographical boundaries increase. Once services become unfeasible, they are eliminated, reducing available services even further (Lewis, Scott, & Calfee, 2013).

Risk and Protective Factors

Rural life can be both a risk factor and a protective factor. Newland, Lawler, Carr, Dykstra, and Rob, (2014) described how children in rural areas benefit from connections with their families and communities, which produce a sense of safety and trust. The contrasting view of rural life notes the potential for social isolation, health disparities, economic stress, poverty, limited job opportunities, transportation challenges, and poor access to goods and services. Newland et al. (2014) notes that more research is needed to develop a knowledge base of rural issues for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the social services arena. Both risk and protective factors play a role in the development and implementation of effective services in rural areas-services which can have a positive effect on parenting.

Impacts on Parenting

Several researchers define the well-being of children, and the resources necessary for their day-to-day care. Newland et al., (2014) define the well-being of children by evaluating
cognitive judgments and life satisfaction. Cohen, Mulroy, Tull, White, and Crowley, (2014) discuss the importance of housing when determining the well being of children. One of the basic requirements for the well being of children is adequate housing. It is difficult for parents to focus on parenting when adequate housing is an ongoing problem.

Although there is a plethora of research on rural poverty and the ways in which families survive, there is limited data on how these circumstances impact parenting. As Nelson (2006) indicates, the poor rely on complex combinations of income streams to supplement earnings and welfare benefits including family, friends, and other people in their lives. These situations put children at risk. When parents lack the financial resources to provide for their children, they are often forced to rely on others to provide care for their children. These situations put children at risk. Because of the lack of available resources, parents who need counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, and other necessary interventions are often unable to make sound decisions for their children, therefore impacting their ability to parent. Parents are better able to handle daily stressors when they have support networks of family and friends in addition to available services (Ontai, Sano, Hatton, & Conger, 2008; Callan & Dolan, 2013).

Women living in poverty are even more vulnerable to a lack of resources or employment, and single women feel unsupported and inadequate in their ability to parent when there are limited resources available in rural areas. Henderson, Tickamyer, and Tadlock (2005) indicate that women working in rural environments need support in the community to remain employed. Identifying the gaps in service in rural areas and understanding the culture of rural life is important in order to identify the implications for social work practice.
Implications for Improved Social Work Practice

Rural Social Work is a fundamental topic in social work curriculums. It is essential both for practice and for the profession as a whole that social workers consider all groups of people. According to Aguiniga, Madden, Faulkner, and Salehin (2013) developing pay incentives for rural social workers may improve their retention.

Religious beliefs often play a significant role in the lives of the rural people. In a study conducted by Zellmer and Anderson-Meger (2011) regarding Midwestern religious beliefs, older rural residents reported that religious practices of older residents were a major focus of their lives, and they tended to have more conservative viewpoints. These participants tended to have less trust in the profession of social work which affected their use of social work services. Social workers in rural areas could improve their effectiveness by identifying the importance of religion and spirituality to the older residents with whom they work.

Support systems are crucial for emotional health so finding solutions to the dilemma of limited resources in rural areas demands creative ideas. One solution is to use the people already living in this environment. Churches and schools are cornerstones of rural areas. Residents focus on school and church events, which are central to community socialization. Promoting use of the buildings themselves is a proactive step but encouraging actual incorporation of these resources into service provision could provide an even greater benefit to families by expanding their support networks.

Community of Natural Helpers

Rural communities rely more on informal networks than do urban communities, and these networks can help communities respond to a crisis. Churches are often gathering places for families and a comfortable and familiar environment; teaching church leaders to become support
group leaders is therefore a natural progression. In some rural communities, churches may be the only viable option for assistance (Lewis et al., 2013).

Along with recognizing this role of rural churches in their communities, social workers can help identify and train “natural helpers”—people in the community known to be effective in helping others and who is successful in finding solutions. Natural helpers either take action or provide emotional support and are often the first line of informal mental health services in rural areas. Most helpers in the study by Patterson, Memmott, Brennan, and Germain (1992), were women, had permanence in the community, and had at least a high school education. In a 1988 study by Patterson, Germain, Brennan, and Memmott, natural helping was viewed as effective by the helpers.

The training of these helpers focuses on their own experiences rather than the experience of the professional (Germain & Patterson, 1988). It includes use of eco-maps to understand the importance of informal support in their own lives and case vignettes to help them see how people in the community have services or skills they can offer others. Once natural helpers are identified in the community, social workers can work with them to determine their availability to the community. Legitimizing the role of natural helpers, and identifying them for the community can give community members permission to make contact with them. Often the help residents receive from other community members help solve their problems, removing the need for further services.

**Community Organizing**

Mackie (2009) encourages the use of techniques created by Saul Alinsky, a community organizer known for using unconventional tactics to help community members focus on an issue (Mackie & Leibowitz, 2013). Although typically thought of when trying to bring about a radical
change, the approach can also be helpful when working with community organizing. Using Alinsky’s concepts, community members themselves will be able to offer support and address some of the issues left unanswered because of limited services. There are also additional benefits when communities come together. If parents are struggling with specific parenting problems and the community comes together to offer assistance, the community then takes some responsibility and has buy in for the problem and the solution.

It is important to note that communities often have abilities to solve problems, although this potential frequently goes unnoticed, and their capacity is unknown even to community members themselves (Vance, 2017). Along with training social workers to work in rural areas, it is beneficial to have communities provide support as well. Community organizing involves helping community members come together to work toward a specific goal. With the scarcity of resources, a community group can provide an individual needed emotional support in place of individual services. Community leaders can be trained to facilitate groups.

**Home-Based Assistance**

The majority of parenting happens within the home, yet so much of professional work with families is done outside of the home. The assistance of community-based helpers and support groups in the home is beneficial for parents and social work is done best with people in their natural environments. Ecological theory includes micro, mezzo, and macro social work, which are all engaged when considering rural social work. Natural helpers can work with individuals and families in their homes providing emotional support as well as facilitating support groups.
Impact of Solutions on Parenting Ability

Incorporating services through schools, community helpers, churches, and home-based services can have a positive impact on parenting. By focusing specifically on parenting when working with natural helpers, parents are able to work with other parents in the community who can help with a positive approach, rather than talking in the community about the poor parenting skills of other community members. These support groups can emerge from working with natural helpers. Often older parents in the community are a great resource for younger parents. Once natural helpers specific to parenting are identified, having them provide assistance to younger parents is a natural progression. Identified natural helpers can also empower other parents to provide support.

Empowering community members to make positive changes in their communities by helping others can address self-focus, lack of empathy, and lack of community involvement and can be a positive response to a lack of services. Natural helpers can emerge from purposeful community groups. Groups are not exclusive to rural communities, but often are the lifeblood (Mackie, Zammitt, & Alvarez, 2016).

While parents will at times need professional help, these informal helping networks might provide more complete and long-term assistance, and solutions that lead to positive change without the involvement of professionals. With community members as part of the solution, the stigma of asking for help is diminished.

Social Work Curriculum

A unique characteristic of the Social Work profession is its emphasis on systems and how they impact the individual. As social work educators, it is important that we emphasize the involvement of others in the life of an individual. In recent years, there has been a growing focus
on individualism and on personal gratification and selfishness (Henderson et al., 2005).

Incorporating rural social work into the social work curriculum can help address this issues and is crucial in helping students understand the rural environment and seek work in it. A focus on the concepts and principles of interventions in face-to-face work with individuals has been the focus in social work programs at the exclusion of concepts and principles for work with their social and physical environments (Germain & Patterson, 1988). When working with communities and natural helpers, it is important to consider the community as a whole, rather than individually. Macro, mezzo, and micro social work are all incorporated in rural social work. Community organizing, a mezzo approach, is an aspect that needs to be included in the social work curriculum. Although a specific class devoted to rural social work could be an elective, aspects of rural social work needs to be included in social work practice courses.

Educational content on natural helping can be provided in numerous social work classes throughout the curriculum. Germain and Patterson’s study (1988) describes how helper and helpee had mutual interests and concerns, reciprocity of helping, and similar world views. The authors identified two types of helper styles; facilitating and doing. Facilitators typically focus on listening, encouragement, and summarizing strengths. Doers are focused on reducing stress and do for people, at times making decisions for others.

A generalist approach is typically used when working in rural areas. For social work programs preparing students to work in rural areas, a focus on community systems assessment is crucial, and needs to include prevailing cultural norms and values (Gumpert, Saltman, & Sauer-Jones, 2000). Schools of social work are often located in urban areas and focus on urban social work. The policies, ethics, and treatment modalities that work best in urban areas may be in
conflict with those that increase the well being of rural areas (Riebschleger, Norris, Pierce, Pond, & Cummings, 2015).

**Conclusion**

The lack of resources in rural areas impacts the ability of parents to provide adequate parenting. Understanding the nuances and unique characteristics of working with people in the rural population is important for social workers. Because of these unique characteristics, social workers need to find creative solutions to helping parents in rural areas. To equip future social workers, the social work curriculum needs to include understanding of the ecological model as well as specific methods for working in rural areas in order to equip future social workers. Operating from a strengths perspective by identifying the unique characteristics of rural areas and the positive effects of collaboration with rural people in utilizing those strengths is crucial for social work professionals as well as the social work curriculum. Rural social work needs attention.
References


What Are the Identified Ethical Issues Facing Social Work Practitioners in Rural Settings?

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Abstract

Social work and ethics go hand in hand. In the rural setting, ethical issues are unavoidable, creating dilemmas unique to rural social work practice. This systematic analysis aimed to assess the research on ethical issues identified in rural social work by identifying ten articles for review. Ratings in three categories-identification of a clear question, clarity and useful information, and explanation of findings-were used to evaluate the articles. Dual relationships, boundary issues, conflict of interest, and competency emerged as the main themes and issues of how to manage these ethical issues rather than avoidance of ethical issues in rural social work continued to rise to the surface in this research. Results of this systematic analysis demonstrate the need for inclusion of ethical rural practice in the social work curriculum and for additional research in ethical rural practice. In order to provide ethical practice in rural areas, there continues to be a crucial need for creative solutions in offering services.

Keywords: rural social work, ethics in rural social work, boundaries
Introduction

Although the study of rural social work is an ongoing topic of interest, identification of the ethical issues faced by social work practitioners specific to rural social work—defined as work in sparsely populated regions—needs more attention. Ethical practice is at the heart of social work. Not all ethical concerns are relevant to both urban and rural practice, and certainly solutions for handling these concerns do not fit uniformly in both settings. Croxton, Jayaratne, and Mattison (2002) argue that ethical standards for social work were created based on an urban perspective without taking into consideration the rural environment. This approach has implications, for example, the avoidance of ethical dilemmas in social work practice being accepted as best practice. Avoiding ethical issues in rural social work is not a solution; instead methods of addressing these ethical issues are crucial for ethical practice and teaching. As Green (2007) notes, “Frequently, complex ethical issues arise because of the dual and multiple roles which abound in small communities” (p. 41). This manuscript seeks to identify the ethical issues of concern to social work practitioners in rural settings. A better understanding in this area leads to improved methods of addressing ethical issues instead of focusing on the avoidance of ethical problems.

While the literature addresses these ethical issues to some degree; however, additional research is needed in order to identify the ethical issues unique to rural social work as opposed to social work in general. Identifying ethical problems is important for both social work practice and social work education in order to manage the problems. Using the qualitative method of a systematic review of the literature, this study will identify the ethical issues specific to social work practitioners in rural settings.
Literature Review

Social Work Ethics

Ethical practice is at the core of social work. Although other professions strive for ethical practice, social work ethics are uniquely intrinsic to daily practice. The National Association of Social Workers NASW Code of Ethics has specific guidelines to follow for ethical practice and includes not only ethical practice with clients, but with colleagues, society, and in the profession as a whole. The NASW Code of Ethics was established in 1960, revised in 1979 and 1996, and revised most recently in 2017. As Reamer (2001) notes, the maturation of the social work profession’s ethical standards has been a remarkable trend for social work. Ethical practice is at the forefront of social work and continues to evolve. As Reamer (2002) notes in his writings of ethical practice, “The impressive evolution of ethical standards in social work has intensified the need for practitioners to closely examine their ethics-related policies, practices, and procedures. Ethics in social work is an essential feature of social work’s integrity and effectiveness (p.2).”

Rural Social Work Practice

There is agreement in the literature about the uniqueness about practice in rural areas. Deavers (1992) defines three characteristics that distinguish rural life from urban life: small scale, distance from urban centers, and specialized rural economies. Social work done in a rural community is considered different than social work with specific rural populations. A more inclusive perspective is defining rural social work as being wherever rural people are found instead of identifying a rural-urban concept (Daley & Avant, 2004; Daley 2010). Riebschleger (2007) advocates for rural people to be considered at-risk or a diverse group, based on poverty, lower life opportunities, and stigmatized social status. According to NASW (2015) poverty
among children is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. In 2009 the child poverty rate in rural areas was 23.5 percent compared to 20.2 percent in urban areas. At the opposite end of the age spectrum, rural areas have a higher share of older people than the population as a whole. In addition to these areas of diversity, racial and ethnic minorities make up 18.3 percent of rural residents (NASW 2015). People of color living in rural areas have an even higher rate of poverty. There is a large number of military and veterans living in rural areas. With this vast diversity, social workers must be prepared to work with various members of this vast rural population.

An additional challenge associated with rural social work practice is the difficulty of hiring social workers to practice in rural areas. As Mackie and Lips (2010) describe, as the demographics of the U.S. continue to move toward a more urban demographic, the prediction could be made that it will continue to be difficult to hire and retain a variety of human service professionals. This also pertains to social work faculty. Mackie (2012) found differences between the rural and urban institutions in his study of an analysis of employment announcements for social work faculty. Rural institutions were more likely to require the MSW degree but less likely to require two or more years of experience. Rural institutions were less likely to expect evidence of research and instead service and student advising were more identified as expectations.

The social work profession has guidelines available to social work practitioners to provide direction of how to provide services in an ethical manner. In the rural setting, there may be less need to determine how to meet those ethical standards than how to adapt to the rural setting (Vance, 2017). He noted that using an approach that includes both formal and informal
interventions in rural settings leads to less disengagement, advocating for a mixed model of practice.

Rural social work has its challenges; although along with the challenges comes opportunities. Identifying unique approaches is ongoing when working in the rural setting. Collaboration with other professionals as well as working with families and individuals in a collaborative style is adherence to cultural competence. Lifestyle, autonomy, and flexibility are typically associated with working in rural areas (Alford, Cook, & Conway 2012; Green, 2003). With exposure to such a wide range of population and issues in rural areas, there is opportunity for social work practitioners to have a varied experience in generalist social work. Along with this exposure comes the question of how to best manage ethical issues in rural practice.

**Social Work Ethics Specific to Rural Practitioners**

Because of the nature of ethical practice being part of what is used as an agent for change, considering how ethical issues in rural practice may be different than typical social work may create pause for many. How could social work practice remain ethical without following the specific ethical guidelines? The 2001 National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Assembly adopted a position statement on the unique aspects of rural social work practice. The assembly noted how few other settings expose social workers more to the risk of violating the code of ethics that states social workers are to take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries (NASW Code of Ethics 1.06). Dual relationships are an ethical issue frequently discussed in the literature when considering rural social work ethics. Social work practitioners do not always have the option of avoiding dual relationships although some writers believe otherwise. Gripton and Valentich (2003) note the predominant stance of health and human services professions has been to exclude
dual relationships. The actual experience by social work practitioners in rural areas does not always fit with these professional standards. Social workers in rural communities often have different experiences than urban-based social workers when dealing with confidentiality, reciprocity, community acceptance, visibility, and dual relationships. Commonly held standards in urban settings do not fit when considering rural social work (Bodor, 2008; Brocious, Eisenberg, York, Shepard, Clayton, & Van Sickle, 2013; Gripton & Valentich, 2003). Social workers in rural settings learn how to manage these issues, not avoid them. Identifying solutions through creative approaches is crucial in rural social work. Lewis, Scott, & Calfee (2013) identified local churches and public schools as options to expand delivery of social services. Social work education typically involves learning how to avoid or maintain professional distance from clients. Not only is this often not possible, participating in community activities is essential to build relationships in rural communities.

Establishing boundaries is crucial in rural areas instead of limiting social relationships. NASW (2015) established a policy statement regarding rural practice, noting how rural practice requires a sophisticated level of understanding of values and ethics. Reamer (2012) distinguishes between boundary issues and dual relationships. He defines boundary crossings as a professional being involved in a dual relationship with a client but one that is not exploitative, manipulative, or deceptive, although not unethical and distinguishes between a boundary crossing and a boundary violation (p. 9). Boundary issues are ongoing in rural communities and at times, can result in boundary violations. Boundary issues and dual relationships are noted by Gripton & Valentich (2004) to be a different situation to consider in community developers and organizers than with practitioners working in direct service. They note how the rural community presents a dilemma where it is nearly impossible to avoid dual relationships. Normalizing these dual
relationships may be more realistic than avoiding them. It may be better to ask when and how social workers engage in dual relationships rather than asking if they should (Ginsberg 2011). Establishing clear boundaries along with identifying the dual relationships could better serve rural populations.

Social workers in rural areas are often times generalists. They are called upon to work with variety of groups and populations. An ethical dilemma associated with rural practice is responding to requests for assistance where a social worker may not have a strong professional background. Social work competence is addressed in social work ethics in sections 1.04, 4.01, and 4.06 of the NASW code of ethics. Social workers in rural areas may be called upon to help with an issue where the social worker lacks background or credentials to provide the service. The ethical conflict then becomes professional competency versus the need to serve the client (Daley 2016). The literature acknowledges the complexity of the work faced by social workers in rural areas.

**Methods**

A systematic review was chosen for identifying ethical issues experienced by social work practitioners in rural areas. Without a review of the literature, it is difficult to determine what research needs to be done (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas 2017). The amount of information on rural social work is daunting and difficult for professionals to stay abreast of relevant and updated research. A systematic review compiles information for the reader. This type of evaluation gives opportunity to have a comprehensive view of the ethical issues that are known to rural practitioners. This review analyzes the literature as a way to not only identify the issues social workers face, but also to identify the extent to which literature provides guidance in relation to these dilemmas.
Search Strategy

SocINDEX and Social Work Abstracts were the databases used to conduct a search involving ethical issues experienced by social work practitioners in rural areas were. SocINDEX was selected based on the broad spectrum and Social Work Abstracts was selected based on the more specific approach. The search terms used were ethics, dual relationships, boundaries, code of ethics, and confidentiality. These terms were used individually and then in conjunction with the term rural social work. Seventy articles emerged as a result of the search strategy.

Criteria of Exclusion and Inclusion

Exclusion criteria included research prior to 2000 (considered dated), articles not written in English, and articles not peer reviewed. Inclusion criteria included the above mentioned search terms along with articles that are a result of research. As a result, nine articles emerged to fit the criteria of inclusion and are the focus of this research.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were extracted from articles and categorized as follows:

- Author and name of article
- Problem
- Population
- Research question
- Hypothesis
- Concepts or variables
- Measurement or instrument
- Research design
- Data analysis
Results/findings

Information was organized by using an Excel spreadsheet in order to synthesize the results. The themes that emerged were the ethical challenges unique to rural social work, the need for enhanced training, attention to rural issues in social work education, identifying tactics needed unique to rural practice, the increased importance of supervision of social workers in rural areas, and the need to incorporate effective strategies to manage ethical issues rather than identifying ways to avoid potential or problematic ethical concerns.

The specific ethical issues that emerged were dual relationships, boundary issues, conflicts of interest, and competency. The articles were rated on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) to evaluate the clarity, the yield of useful information, identification of a clear question, and explanation of findings. A score of one was designated for lack of attention to the majority of the above criteria. A score of five was designated for a high degree of attention to the majority of the above criteria. The articles were placed into one of the five categories. The words are the data in qualitative analysis. The thematic analysis are grouped into categories.

Results

The four themes identified are dual relationships, boundary issues, conflict of interest, and competency. This systematic literature review on ethical issues in rural social work was completed in order to identify the ethical issues faced by social workers in rural settings. The search criteria yielded nine articles. There is some overlap of issues where more than one ethical issue is identified in an article. The following are the results of the ethical issues that emerged throughout the identified themes. The rating of each article is included at the end of the results section.
Dual Relationships

Of the nine articles included in this study, three were focused on dual relationships. The complex issues associated with dual or multiple relationships in rural areas were identified in the articles. In one study welfare workers described how multiple roles were managed with specific methods identified to solve the issues caused by multiple or dual roles. In Green’s (2007) study six welfare workers were interviewed and the results emphasized the need for managing the effects of dual relationships in rural practice rather than proclaiming the importance of avoiding these issues. In Sidell’s (2007) study of employees in rural child welfare agencies with a response rate of 64%, it was noted that social work professionals are often in a reversed role where they may be the seeker and the client is then the helper. The studies note the clients experience the benefit of viewing the practitioner as human in these dual relationships, noting how professionals having experiences in the communities demonstrate their approachability. Gonyea, Wright, and Kulkosky’s (2014) note how it quickly became obvious in their study to address the inevitable dual relationship rather than how to avoid them. All of the studies regarding dual relationships note the importance of establishing strategies for handling dual relationships. This is unique to the rural setting. Dual relationships in social work practice is typically considered an ethical issue to be avoided. Because of the inevitable nature of dual relationships in rural social work, this research indicates dual relationships need to be managed.

Boundary Issues

Boundary issues were identified in one of the articles. Developing an ability to be considered an expert comes with experience. Living in rural areas requires community members to engage in a variety of ways. It is virtually impossible to live in a rural setting and not engage with clients both on a personal and professional level. Gregory, Green, and McLaren (2007)
identify methods practitioners can employ to manage boundary issues both in a way to remain professional yet also continue in those relationships in the community by establishing boundaries with clients at the beginning of their work together. The responsibility of establishment of boundaries rests with the professional. This qualitative study included seventy participants and identified the power differential that is present in these relationships. The participants acknowledged that the ultimate responsibility to establish appropriate boundaries rested with the professional.

**Conflicts of Interest**

All nine of the articles identified conflicts of interest as an ethical issue. Ethical issues in general pose conflicts of interest and all the articles described the dilemma of working in rural areas and managing the conflicts of interest that are inevitable in rural practice.

**Competency**

The issue of competency was identified as an ethical issue in four articles. The training needs of social work practitioners were identified as an ongoing problem in rural areas. Often rural social workers are faced with the dilemma of the client receiving no care or the social worker not having credentials needed for treating the client. Results of research indicate social work practitioners identified training needs to alleviate ethical concerns. Ultimately the professional needs to determine their own level of competence in each unique situation and then decide if it is appropriate for their involvement. In a research study where surveys were mailed, 27% responded to the survey identifying dual relationships, competence, and confidentiality as the main three issues. Riebschleger’s (2007) study identified specific suggestions for effective rural practice by interviewing participants in focus groups. These individuals offered specific practical advise of how to better work within a rural setting.
**Ratings**

Articles were rated on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) for clarity, useful information, identification of a clear hypotheses, and explanation of findings yielding one article with a rating of 5. This article met all criteria listed. One of the articles with a rating of 4 met the majority of the criteria. Six articles were given a rating of 3. One article was given a rating of 2.

**Table 1. Analysis of Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Rating of Article</th>
<th>Identification of a clear question</th>
<th>Clarity/useful information</th>
<th>Explanation of findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gregory, Green, &amp; McLaren</td>
<td>Rating: 5</td>
<td>The question was clear, useful information was identified, and the explanation of findings was laid out in a detailed manner.</td>
<td>Practitioners may remain optimistic and strategic throughout the setting, although educational institutions should prepare practitioners. This is considered to be somewhat useful.</td>
<td>By utilizing strategies, these workers were able to live and work comfortably in their rural communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Rating: 2</td>
<td>While the question was clear, the answer was not. The implications were that multiple roles can be managed, although with no description of how this would be accomplished.</td>
<td>Multiple roles can be managed</td>
<td>Effective strategies need to be established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren, Ahls, Haile, Nunez, Weatherford, &amp; Zakaria</td>
<td>Rating: 3</td>
<td>The question was answered with clarity and useful information. The implications of the study are weak.</td>
<td>Three notable self-reported ethical issues were identified: dual relationships, competence, and confidentiality.</td>
<td>It was noted how the results of this study may contribute to the enhancement of ethics training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Rating</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>Implication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue, Kutzler, &amp; Marcon-Fuller</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Although the question is clear, the implication of the findings does not provide a clear direction.</td>
<td>Respondents identified four primary and unique ethical challenges for rural social workers.</td>
<td>Future social workers should be exposed to unique needs, roles and requirements of ethical social worker supervision in a rural community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gonyea, Wright, &amp; Kulkosky</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>There was useful information and a clear question; however, the implication of findings was weak.</td>
<td>Dual relationships are possible if the therapist believes it will yield more benefit than harm.</td>
<td>There needs to be a better understanding of the complexities of dual relationships in rural areas and support for further research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riebschleger</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>The question is clear and identified themes were useful information. The implication of findings was not clear.</td>
<td>Themes were identified as community connections, generalist practice, and diversity.</td>
<td>Recommendatio n is for social workers to use informal community resources and adjust to a slower pace of community change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidell</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>The question was easily identified with a clear answer. Useful information regarding the implication of years of experience was clear. The implication of findings called for enhanced training with little direction.</td>
<td>The number of years of experience makes a difference in how dual relationships are viewed.</td>
<td>Research suggests there is need for enhanced training on dual relationships in rural settings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Identifying common ethical issues in rural social work is an important beginning in establishing better practice in rural areas. Dual relationships, competence, boundaries, and conflict of interest stand out as the major ethical issues in rural areas. Related studies suggest additional ethics training and more attention being aid toward identifying competent ways of finding creative approaches to working in rural areas. Findings suggest the need for future studies in how to deal with ethical issues and implications for future research in identifying creative approaches. This is particularly timely in that the NASW recently (2017) published a revision to its Code of Ethics, the first since 2008.
An additional finding was the need for incorporation of the needs of rural social work in social work education. Identifying the different approaches needed in urban areas versus rural areas in social work education betters prepares students for being professionals, many of whom will go on to work in rural contexts. With this knowledge, students have needed information to make informed decisions regarding rural practice.

The results of this systematic review fit well with existing literature. The articles reviewed demonstrated the ethical issues in rural social work and the dilemma of how to address these issues. For instance, dual relationships are a dominant theme throughout all of the articles. Dual relationships are unavoidable in rural social work. Although there is discussion of dual relationships, creative solutions offered in the published articles reviewed are minimal. This points to the need for educational programs to not only note which ethical dilemmas may be particularly prominent in rural settings, but to give attention to ways in which beginning practitioners can think about resolving or working with these. Rather than advocating for avoidance of dual relationships, social work education would do best in teaching students how to manage these dual relationships.

Field experiences in rural areas for students not only introduce students to rural social work but also gives them time to experience rural social work along with concepts learned through the curriculum. Often the challenge of field experiences is identifying social work supervisors for field supervision. Identifying innovative methods for providing supervision would improve the likelihood of student placement in rural areas. Technology provides opportunity for field supervision that could not previously be used. The various forms of face to face supervision by utilizing technology makes a difference in students’ experience of support.
Utilizing a task supervisor in conjunction with a social work supervisor is an example of collaboration, a tried and true skill used in social work.

Identifying alternative methods of ethical practice involving dual relationships is an area that needs more research. Social workers providing services in rural areas are often isolated. Training and workshops offered through technology is an example of identifying creative methods for ongoing sound practice. These dual relationships may appropriately involve community helpers, another method of identification of creative methods to assist social workers in rural areas. Collaboration in rural communities is a natural function of people in rural areas and is a solution not foreign to the normal daily interaction of people in rural areas.

An additional area of practice to focus on when identifying rural social work issues is addressing cultural concerns. Rural areas are comprised of diverse populations. The need for cultural competency, a crucial aspect of social work, is evident in rural social work with the need for ongoing teaching and identification of specific cultural aspects unique to the rural population. Addressing cultural competency through trainings and workshops is important for ongoing effective social work practice.

This literary analysis replicates other studies in ethical issues in rural social work. This study involved a small sample, which could impact the strength of the results. Although it was small, the implications of the study appear to be consistent with other studies. Ongoing training for social workers as well as incorporation of the study of rural social work into the social work curriculum is crucial to best serve rural populations.
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Presentation: The Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas On Parenting Ability:

Realistic Solutions

Judy Zimbelman

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Abstract

Resources for families and parents in rural areas are often scarce, which impacts the functioning of parents. Creative solutions for establishing resources for parents in rural areas are crucial for the functioning of parents. This conceptual paper identifies the factors that impact the ability of parents to provide adequate parenting specific to rural life. An overview of this paper with specific solutions was presented. This paper provides an overview of the presentation, entitled “The Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas On Parenting Ability and Realistic Solutions” on March 31st, 2017 at the National Association of Social Work Annual Conference in Sioux Falls, SD. Attendees’ feedback and a critical analysis of the learning process is provided.

Keywords: Rural social work, parenting ability, limited resources
The conceptual paper presented at the NASW conference uses the ecological theory for conceptualization. Specific factors pertinent to rural social work were identified along with identification of specific solutions. Documentation of presentation acceptance and the presentation are found in the appendices.

Overview of Presentation

The conference presentation entitled, “The Impact of Limited Resources in Rural Areas On Parenting Ability and Realistic Solutions” was presented on March 31st, 2017, at the South Dakota National Association of Social Workers Annual Conference. The conference was held March 30th and 31st, 2017 in Sioux Falls, SD. The conference proposal was accepted in electronic form. Elements of the submitted conference proposal are provided including the presentation abstract, learning objectives and key words; and presentation proposal. The conference proposal is included along with learning objectives and key words. The presentation is discussed along with slides.

Presentation Abstract, Learning Objectives, and Key Words

Social workers are required to identify unserved populations and advocate for the underserved and overlooked populations. The theme for the NASW conference in 2017 is “Social Workers Stand Up,” identifying how social workers advocate for those who are not able to advocate for themselves. Identifying factors that contribute to lack of services in rural areas along with creative solutions fits well with the NASW theme. Participants will gain knowledge on the:

1. Encourage participants to identify the gaps in their area
2. Define how these gaps affect children
3. Identify creative solutions of how to provide resources
4. Develop a plan with professionals on how to create partnerships for working together

**Presentation Proposal**

Resources for families and parents in rural areas are often scarce. Because of the limited mental health and other services in rural areas, families often do not receive the support and services that is needed in order to provide a healthy environment for effective parenting. The lack of emotional support, counseling, parenting education, addiction treatment, domestic violence treatment, and similar services leaves parents in rural areas feeling isolated and unsupported, and therefore, affect their ability to parent, which in turn, negatively affects children. Creative solutions are necessary to establish resources for parents in rural areas as well as encouraging professionals to create partnerships to combat the isolation felt by providers working alone.

**Discussion of Presentation and Key References**

The presentation provided opportunities for social work professionals throughout the state of South Dakota to identify factors contributing to lack of services in rural areas. Twenty-three power point slides were used throughout the sixty-minute presentation.

**Introduction and Theoretical Stance**

Slides 1-5 described the history of social work being informed by urbanization, which gave limited voice to rural social work. Discussion of the focus being on drawbacks of rural social work rather than strengths was brought to the attention of the audience. The objectives of the presentation were listed. Factors that make rural social work unique were identified. Ecological theory was identified as the theoretical stance
used to make the argument of the need for expanded solutions to the lack of available services for people in rural areas.
Why Rural Social Work?

- History of Social Work began with urbanization
- Social programs are often geared toward urban populations
- Much of the population of South Dakota is rural
- The urban populations of South Dakota has rural roots
- Drawbacks of working in rural areas are often focused on rather than identifying the strengths of working in rural areas
Slide 3

Objectives for Today

- 1. Encourage participants to identify the gaps in their area
- 2. Define how these gaps affect children.
- 3. Identify creative solutions of how to provide resources
- 4. Develop a plan with professionals on how to create partnerships for working together.

Slide 4

History of Social Work

- Understanding of where we came from helps us to know where we are going
- Jane Addams: Started with working in urban areas, started Hull House in Chicago in 1889 to investigate and improve conditions in the industrialized districts of Chicago, problems that were created by urbanization and immigration
- Hull House set the foundation for social work in America
- Mary Richmond: Started with case work as a “friendly visitor”, while working as a director of a charity organization in New York City in 1909, she helped to implement social work programs
Uniqueness of Rural Social Work

- Detachment from other communities
- Lower population
- Limited amount of resources
- Less variety to choose from for goods and services
- Lack of anonymity
- Larger land mass
- Government programs are often based on urban populations
- Rurality has its own culture
NASW Statement

Slides 6-8 describe the NASW statement on rural social work, which includes information on social workers employed in rural areas.

Slide 6

- The caucus well understands that despite the charm of quiet life in the country, social workers practicing in isolated areas face more complex challenges than their counterparts in urban cities.
- Social workers in rural communities are paid less, have limited access to specialty services and deal with crisis situations more often, because prevention and early intervention services are not readily available.
- There are many people who need services too, with nearly 50 million Americans (17 percent) living in rural areas, and too few practitioners to adequately serve rural populations.
Continued NASW Statement

- Technology creates more access to services, trained social workers are needed to deliver that care. Three loan-forgiveness programs are available to social workers: the College Cost Reduction Act of 2007; the National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program; and the Higher Education Act. All have service requirements that vary from two to 10 years. Specifically, the College Cost Reduction Act requires 10 years of service, which can be a difficult requirement to fulfill.

- Sam Hickman, secretary of the caucus and executive director of the NASW West Virginia Chapter, “We want people to look at rural issues in the same way as minority issues, like a specialized practice.”

Continued NASW Statement

- Social workers often carry large student loan debt relative to their modest salaries, so the ease of loan forgiveness is imperative to retain a skilled workforce. Eighty-one percent of baccalaureate graduates, 80.5 percent of master’s graduates, and 65.5 percent of doctoral graduates have loan debt. The mean amount of loan debt ranges from $31,880 to $42,149, according to 2013 report from the Council on Social Work Education.

- “We need to make sure professionals are place-committed, not placement bound,” he said. This will be key to growing the social work workforce in high-need areas.
Slide 9

Picture of rural SD

- Drawbacks: Limited number of resources for families, limited options for professionals, dual relationships, backward thinking, limited opportunities, everyone knows your business

- Strengths: Dual relationships, limited opportunities, opportunity for creative thinking, close relationships, others watch out for each other

Slide 10

Why does it matter?

- In South Dakota: poverty of children
- As we graduate social work students from our programs in SD, we want to keep some of them
- Although we have Sioux Falls and Rapid City, much of SD is rural
- Many of the populations that we work with have rural history
- Many rural populations are marginalized
- Rural social work seems to not be “en vogue”, let’s change that
Systems in Social Work

Slide 11 describes how the micro, mezzo, and macro plays a role in rural social work. Identification of strengths of rural social work along with drawbacks are listed. The importance of bringing rural social work to the forefront is discussed with specifics on who the population is in South Dakota.

Slide 11

Micro, Mezzo, Macro

- Micro: working with individuals
- Mezzo: working with groups and communities
- Macro: working with the system
Risk Factors

Slides 12-14 discuss the risk factors and identified who are most at risk for not receiving services. Impacts on parenting with statistics on poverty in rural areas and the impact of poverty on parenting are emphasized. Information on women’s role in parenting and how factors that impact rural social work are often the factors impacting women. Slides 13 and 14 focus on parenting and how limited resources impact ability to parent. These slides provide information regarding women and how women in rural areas are often the primary caregivers of children.

Slide 12
Impacts on Parenting

- Parents do better with support, not in isolation
- Natural accountability where there are people “watching”
- 18 of the 50 poorest counties in the nation are in Nebraska, ND, and SD (Cochran,)
- In the U.S., more than 500 rural counties are defined as persistently poor, defined by poverty rates that have exceeded 20% since 1960, 37 of these counties had child poverty rates about 45% in 1999, these counties are in the South, Southwest, and SD (Lohmann, 2005)

Women and Parenting

- Women are often the caregivers to children
- Rural women are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Wigington-Bice, Simons, & Huddleston-Casas, 2015)
- Rural poverty affects all the residents with the lack of access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities
- Without available resources, parents are forced to leave their children in situations that may not be appropriate
- Women living in poverty are even more vulnerable to the lack of resources or employment
Solutions

Slides 15-21 refer to creative solutions to limited resources in rural areas. Community helpers, use of technology, and collaboration were identified as solutions to lack of services. Discussion on the importance of incorporating rural social work into social work curriculum was included.

Slide 15

Community/Natural Helpers

- Why we need community helpers: They know about the community and family in ways professionals do not
- They understand the culture and neighborhoods
- More likely to hear about problems before the problems become severe so that interventions are the only options
- More able to provide long term support
Slide 16

What can Natural Helpers do?

- Skill Building
- Emotional Support
- Community Leadership
- Resource Acquisition
- Concrete Help

Slide 17

Community of Natural Helpers

- Not a new approach, “Social service professionals who serve rural areas need to develop practice innovations that do not tax the shrinking resources of their financially troubled communities” (Memmott & Brennan 1988)
- We need a fresh way to identify natural helpers and engage them
Slide 18

Technology

- NASW created standards of practice for use of technology
- Can be used for supervision of social work students in the field
- Counseling
- Staying connected with community helpers or support group leaders
- Connecting with other social workers or collaboration

Slide 19

Collaboration

- How can we as social workers identify others in the community for collaboration?
- When we are working with people from rural settings, how can we identify who to contact and how can we make them comfortable?
- Social workers can work with others in the community: ministers, other home-based workers, teachers
- Anytime we can make a personal showing, it makes a difference
SW Curriculum

- What do we need to do to prepare social workers new in the field?
- Field opportunities for students in rural areas
- Include discussions on rural social work

What can Social Workers do?

- View rural social work in a different light
- Collaborate
- Identify community helpers
- Utilize existing resources
- Community Organizing
- Staying aware of services throughout the state
- Remain active in community and with other professionals
References

Slides 22-23 include references.

Slide 22


Slide 23


References


