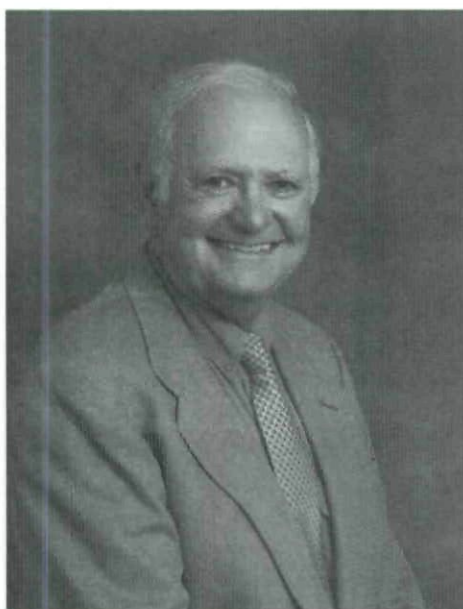


# "INVENTING" RURAL SOCIAL WORK

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*How are research and scholarship agendas developed? As scholarly productivity continues to grow in importance for those who are employed in higher education and some social agencies, the issues of developing research foci and publishing within those emphases is an increasingly crucial issue. Such agendas may emerge from experiences and demands for knowledge as well as from the deliberate and planned selection of a research area. This narrative discusses how one may develop an area of research emphasis as a result of chance and unique opportunities that may differ markedly from one's original research intentions. The article is based on the author's development of some of the concepts of rural social work. The field of rural social work has influenced social work practice and education significantly for much of the history of the profession, especially during the past 40 years.*



## Coming to Education

The University of Oklahoma School of Social Work needed to employ additional faculty in 1963 who could teach social research, social group work, community organization, and the social science concepts of human behavior in preparation for the School's accreditation reaffirmation. I was 27 years old, applied for a faculty position, and was employed by the Oklahoma School to meet some of those needs. Like most social work educators at the time, I

held only a bachelor's degree and a M.S.W. There were few Ph.D.s in social work education in the 1960s. I was selected because I was one of only two social group workers living in Oklahoma and had some experience in community work as well as extensive undergraduate education in the social sciences. In addition to teaching, I also became heavily involved in rural social welfare development in Oklahoma, especially with American Indian groups such as Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, for which I served as a consultant and trainer. I also worked as a trainer for the state's Department of Public Welfare, Peace Corps, Head Start, and Vista, for which the University of Oklahoma was a major educational center. The training

emphases were often on preparing staff and volunteers for rural areas.

Although M.S.W.s were often tenured faculty members in schools of social work, it was clear to me, from my contacts in other units of the University, that the doctorate would be an expectation for most of those who wanted long-term careers in higher education. There were few social work doctoral programs in the 1960's. After examining doctoral programs in other fields at the University of Oklahoma, I applied for, was accepted to, and completed the doctorate in Political Science, which was also my undergraduate major.

## Social Work Education in the 1960s

Until the mid-1960s, social work's human behavior content and most of its practice teaching at the majority of schools, especially smaller schools such as Oklahoma, focused on Freudian psychoanalytic theory. A few followed the teachings of Otto Rank, who some called a neo-Freudian (Briar, 1987). At Oklahoma and most other M.S.W. programs, everything was taught through a Freudian psychoanalytic screen and the human behavior content followed the basic teachings of Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, and Erik Erikson (Briar, 1987, Meyer, 1987). The Council on Social Work Education Curriculum Policy Statements of the 1940s and 1950s began demanding social science

content in the M.S.W. curriculum (baccalaureate programs were not accredited until the mid-1970s) such as anthropology, political science, social psychology, and sociology (Briar, 1987). Earlier statements required schools, even those concentrating on social casework, to also teach about group behavior, work with groups, and community organization. My assignment was to teach social group work and community organization and to develop a human behavior and the social environment course covering social science concepts to students who, until then, had only been exposed, for the most part, to individual and family concepts such as the ages and stages of human development and health and mental health issues that affected individuals.

### Research Emphasis

I did not set out at the beginning of my career in social work education to be a "rural expert." Like most new academics, my research and publication interests initially arose from my political science dissertation research, which was about the legal rights of people with mental disabilities in Oklahoma. I had some success in publishing articles on the subject in legal and mental health journals (Ginsberg, 1966, 1967, 1970) and, later, in the popular periodical of opinion, *The Nation* (Ginsberg, 1974).

But for many years, beginning in the late 1960s, a good bit of my writing has been about rural social work, although I also wrote books and articles on other subjects such as evaluation research and social work management. This narrative is about the ways in which I developed some of the concepts of rural social work practice, many of which have been widely published in the social work literature.

The rural social work emphasis and its underlying principles came together for me as I researched the subject and wrote and spoke with others with similar interests. But

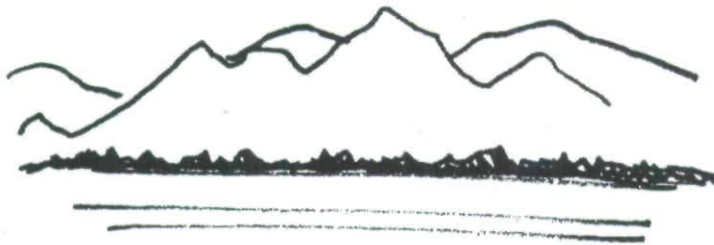
largely the ideas came from reflecting on my experiences as a social work practitioner and educator and from the demands for a Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting presentation on rural practice that I was asked to make in 1968. I had been to Annual Program Meetings in the past but had never presented at one. So I *had to* develop some ideas about the subject—or be scheduled for a slot at a national meeting with nothing to say.

The scholarship niche of rural social work and the gap in materials on the subject strongly suggested that it could be developed as an emphasis in the profession. Few others were writing about rural issues, but I eventually learned that relatively large numbers of social workers, especially educators, sought ideas about the subject. Over the years since I began writing about rural issues in 1968, many articles, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, a journal, workshops, and the like, followed my initial work on the subject—authored by myself and many others. It has been a viable and central part of the careers of many social work educators and researchers. As an area of research and scholarship, it has persisted for nearly 40 years in its modern form.

I recall that when I began writing about rural issues I was frightened. Academics such as myself usually prefer pursuing their scholarship by reviewing the earlier literature, a usual starting point in studying any subject. But there was little in print (in an era well before the internet) on which to build. So I didn't know if my ideas, many of which were necessarily based on personal observations, practice experience, and conversations with those who worked in rural areas, made sense. It was possible, I thought, that whatever I said could be either ridiculed or ignored or both.

### Oklahoma's and West Virginia's Accreditation and My Rural Research

In 1967, the University of Oklahoma social work program faced its reaffirmation



of accreditation, beginning with a site visit, by the Council on Social Work Education, which had been something of a problem for the School in earlier years and remained a problem after the Commission acted on the School's status. But that reaffirmation eventually led to my first appointment as a social work education program director and my writings on rural social work.

The chair of the 1967 Council on Social Work Education Oklahoma reaffirmation site team was Richard Lodge, then Dean at Virginia Commonwealth University and later Executive Director of CSWE. During the course of his evaluation of the courses I taught, we got along well and had a number of mutual interests. I told him of a long-term ambition to eventually become dean or director of a school of social work. I had been the manager or president of many organizations, beginning as a teenager in the 1950s. I had an interest in and perhaps a talent for management and my doctorate in political science had a heavy emphasis on public administration.

After the site visit, the CSWE Commission on Accreditation placed the Oklahoma School on probationary accreditation status, which required major changes in its curriculum, its structure, and its resources.

Meanwhile, Lodge, who had chaired the site visit team at West Virginia University, which also had accreditation difficulties in 1967, was employed by West Virginia University to help them find a director for their Division of Social Work. The former director had become Dean of the School of Social Work at Florida State University.

I was one of a few candidates that Lodge recommended to West Virginia and I was their choice, at age 32, to serve as Director of the Division of Social Work, part of its College of Human Resources and Education. The College Dean who chose me, Stanley O. Eikenberry, who later became president of the University of Illinois and after that president of the American Council on Education, had support for his choice from the West Virginia president, James Harlow, who came there from the Education deanship at the University of Oklahoma. I began as Director of the West Virginia University Division of Social Work in the summer of 1968.

### **The 1969 CSWE Annual Program Meeting**

Richard Lodge chaired the 1969 Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting scheduled for Cleveland in January. He and his committee invited me (at the time, presentations were invited—submissions of abstracts and review procedures came later) to develop a workshop on social work in rural communities, not just the impoverished rural communities that were so much a part of West Virginia and Appalachia but also wealthier rural communities with prosperous agricultural and other industries. Lodge knew, of course, about the efforts I was making to build a rural emphasis at West Virginia University. The paper was to be presented at a session designed for those interested in educating social workers for smaller communities.

One of the main issues in the West Virginia University accreditation was the stated emphasis in its accreditation documents on preparing social workers for rural areas, although that emphasis did not appear centrally in the Master of Social Work curriculum. My major assignment as the new director was to help the faculty modify the program so that it fit the accreditation document descriptions. The efforts I made at

West Virginia University helped form the basis for the 1969 presentation.

### **The 1969 Rural Social Work Session**

My arrival in Cleveland for the 1969 APM began badly. Several of us from West Virginia University, which was fairly close, arrived by auto. I was wearing jeans and a sport shirt. When Lodge met us at the hotel registration desk, he was upset: I was, in many ways, his creation. When I changed to a coat and tie for the opening session that evening he said, "Now you look like a dean."

I was astonished by the size and diversity of the audience that came to hear my education for rural social work presentation. I had always thought about rural social work from my perspective as a Southerner and a native Texan. I thought of rural areas as largely Southern and Appalachian, and often focused on minorities such as African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians. However, those who showed up and who, along with their successors, sustain the annual Institute on Social Work in Rural Areas, which began in 1977, were also from New England, New York, Canada, the West Coast, the Midwest—virtually the whole of North America. One can reasonably date the beginning of the institutes and the other modern developments in rural social work from that session in 1969. Perhaps even more dramatic was the enthusiasm of the participants who expressed a longstanding hunger for a session of that sort.

Many writers and teachers about rural social work attribute its modern creation to the work that began with the Annual Program Meeting session in 1969. In fact, the Rural Social Work Caucus presented its Lifetime Achievement Award to me at the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual 2005 Institute, held at a federal facility in rural West Virginia, for the development of some of the basic ideas of how social workers might be educated for work in rural areas. Of course, many other writers and practitioners

further developed those ideas and introduced new concepts and research far beyond what I had originally written.

### **Sources of Rural Ideas and Personal Experiences**

As is true of many career developments, much of what I learned and wrote about rural social work was initially the product of some personal experiences and contacts, although I had no idea at the time that my life then and my writing about rural issues were synergistically related. In 1968, when I began working on rural social work issues I was and had always been a resident of Southern areas of the U.S, living in larger cities such as San Antonio (where I grew up,) New Orleans, and Tulsa. My family roots were in rural Texas: places such as Gonzales, Hallettsville, and Weimar, where my mother and her brothers were raised and where many of my closest relatives still reside. As a social work practitioner, I spent a good part of my time helping develop small town Jewish programs in Arkansas, rural Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas for the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization.



Jewish populations in large Southern cities, usually much less than one percent of the overall population, are in many ways like small towns themselves.

### **West Virginia University, Appalachia, and Rural Social Work**

One of the issues in the WVU accreditation was the emphasis, as mentioned earlier, in their written materials on the goal of preparing social workers for rural community work, which was contradicted by a heavy curriculum emphasis on the theories of Otto Rank, that, along with Freud, influenced social work for much of the first half century of its existence, as discussed earlier. Briar (1987) says that the choice of social work education orientations between Freudian, diagnostic practice and Rankian, functional social work was debated for decades. Additional discussion of the diagnostic/functional split or Freudian vs. Rankian is in Meyer's *Encyclopedia of Social Work* entry (1987). Rankian theory was pursued by only a few schools such as the University of North Carolina and, where it was particularly important, the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. That school and its theories had influenced the former director at West Virginia as well as many of the faculty at West Virginia University's Division of Social Work. However, social work practice in West Virginia was not especially Rankian or Freudian but was characteristically "rough and ready" and practical in that chronically poor state with a declining population base. The subtleties of psychological theories were not central to the West Virginia social work environment, which was more about employment, health care, basic education, and other survival issues.

The orientation towards Rankian theory especially affected the program's field instruction. Pittsburgh, just an hour and a half away from WVU, in Morgantown, had a grand array of social agencies but the orientation of the University of Pittsburgh School, many of whose graduates staffed the agencies, was toward Freud rather than Rank. The West Virginia School wanted functionalist placements. Consequently, many of the field instruction sites were in urban areas of the United States East Coast: Baltimore,

Philadelphia, and fewer in the Appalachian region, which the West Virginia MSW program claimed as its service area in its accreditation documents.

Part of my mission was to modify the program so that it was genuinely focused on rural communities and conducted all or most of its field instruction in the Appalachian region. So one of my first acts as director was to require that all the Division's field placements be located in the Appalachian region.

Appalachia was an area of special public interest in the 1960s, partly because of the emphasis placed on the region by President John F. Kennedy in 1960. The region, which is composed primarily of rural areas and small towns, is mountainous (which makes it difficult to attract many kinds of industries), is economically focused on coal mining and steel production, is largely non-agricultural, is predominantly White, and is poorer than most of the rest of the United States, with chronically high rates of unemployment. Many observers believed that the election of Kennedy, the nation's only Roman Catholic president, was largely a result of his victory in the 1960 West Virginia Democratic primary. Appalachia includes not only all of West Virginia but also a large mountainous sector of the Eastern U.S., from New York to Mississippi. Much of the Appalachian population live in Western Pennsylvania, which adjoins the state of West Virginia, from which most of the WVU students came.

Clearly, social work field placements and social work practice in Appalachia were likely to be different than those in much of the rest of social work in the United States. So there were plenty of opportunities for rural, Appalachian field placements, which required distinctive approaches to social work practice, different than one might encounter in the nation's more metropolitan areas. There were also ample opportunities for developing ideas about curriculum content that fit with

the needs of rural practitioners. The distillation of those ideas became a major part of the framework I developed for writing about rural social work.

### **Small Community Research**

Although social work in rural communities was, in the 1960's, a relatively uncharted area of recent social work scholarship, there had been considerable interest in rural social work practice in pre-World War II America because of the neglect of and pervasive social problems in rural communities (Martinez-Brawley, 1981). However, the emphasis in the 1960's was quite heavily on American urbanization, a force that saw millions of citizens relocating from rural to metropolitan communities. The problems of urban violence, gangs, poor housing, and the like were major factors in American social policy development. The 1960's were also the time of the desegregation of the United States and the decade was marked by urban riots and other manifestations of intergroup conflict. So the subject of small town and rural social work was rarely covered at professional meetings or in the professional literature. It was simply driven out by the great preoccupation with the cities.

In many ways, I had to write my presentation for the APM without a great amount of information from other sources and without much literature from the professional journals or social work books, a frightening prospect, as discussed earlier. The literature on rural social work was sparse. How to start and what to prepare were questions I struggled to answer for months while I prepared the paper.

I fell back on other research and writing I had done which was not on the exact subject, but which was relevant to understanding small communities. My first published articles were about the founding of a small community Jewish Community Center program, which I had done in Tulsa (Ginsberg and

Plotkin, 1965; Ginsberg, 1968). Tulsa, of course, is no rural community, but the very small Jewish population was itself a small, cohesive community from which principles could perhaps be deduced that would apply to small town work. The framework for the 1968 article came from the work of Murray G. Ross of Canada who was, at the time, a popular social work community organization author (Ross, 1958; Ross, 1967).

I had also been influenced by the works of Erving Goffman, who served as the president of the American Sociological Association. Goffman's research, which I used as the basis for part of my doctoral dissertation on mental health rights in Oklahoma, gave my preparation of the presentation on rural social work an additional intellectual base. Goffman's studies (1959, 1961, & 1963) were of the ways in which people behave in public places, including institutions. His methods were those of "ethnomethodology" or "ethnographic" research and "symbolic interactionism" (Jary & Jary, 1991). In several ways Ross's research and scholarship seemed similar to Goffman's, although he did not define them in that way.

Goffman's research strategy (1959, 1961, & 1963) was to observe behavior in structured ways and to write about the principles and conclusions drawn from what he observed. Ross followed a similar pattern in developing and communicating his ideas about community organization, using examples and distilling principles from them. That kind of research was perhaps typical of social work's scholarship in the twentieth century.

One of Goffman's concepts was "impression management," in which he studied the ways in which people attempted to govern the impressions others had of them through their own behaviors (1959). Another of his major contributions was the description of "total institutions" (1961), such as convents, sailing ships, and mental hospitals (they were

my reason for finding his work useful in my dissertation research); again, basing his conclusions on his observations and the construction of principles and conclusions from those observations. Other authors continued Goffman's approach to understanding behavior, such as Elliot Liebow (1995), whose last book described the lives of homeless older women.

### Writing the Paper

Ultimately, though, because the audience was social work educators, I decided to organize most of the presentation from the perspective of the social work curriculum areas and ways to teach about practicing in rural areas.

So the original paper, which CSWE published in 1969 (Ginsberg, 1969), and which has been adapted several times in the various editions of CSWE's *Social Work in Rural Communities*, (Ginsberg, ed., 1976, 1994, 1999, & 2005), covers the areas of human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, social research, social work practice, and field instruction. The special rural content one would include within each of those areas was the basis for the presentation. The ideas of what to teach were based on my observations of the kinds of problems social workers encounter in rural areas and the roles they had to play to be effective. Basing the concepts on observations came, in part, from my fascination with Goffman's and Ross's methods.

One fundamental thread that ran through the paper was the necessity of preparing social workers to be generalists if they were to serve rural communities. That came from my experience in Tulsa with the small Jewish community where one had to be an organizer, an administrator, a caseworker, a group worker, and a researcher, as well. It also came from Ross's (1967) insistence that community organization social workers must focus on the

community's perceived needs and wants, not a professional's notions of what the community requires.

The concept of the generalist in social work, which I principally applied to the practice of social work in rural communities, later became the basis for the organization of the total accredited social work curriculum at both the baccalaureate and master's levels. Accredited bachelor's programs currently have to be based on a professional foundation designed to prepare generalist practitioners (Council on Social Work Education, 2004). For the Masters of Social Work degree, the professional foundation, which begins master's studies, also has to prepare students for generalist practice. It is only the second year of study that provides for advanced, specialized practice, a demarcation from earlier curriculum requirements. Before the requirement for a generalist, professional foundation, master's social work education was simply two years without any such special distinction between the foundation and advanced programs. Of course, the foundation requirement was a necessary adaptation to the accreditation of Bachelor of Social Work programs, which began in 1975.

Carol Meyer's overview of direct practice (1987) distinguished between clinical social work and generalist social work, which is described as all the non-clinical areas of practice, not quite the same as the generalist approach used in the rural literature or the generalist expectations of BSW and MSW programs.

### Further Developments

There were many additional events, programs, and institutions that grew out of that 1968 session. Rural social work caucuses developed in both CSWE and the National Association of Social Workers. The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, which was then a major supporter of social work education, established a rural program. (The

West Virginia University MSW program secured a grant for a rural field instruction program in Elkins, West Virginia.) Several other rural options and opportunities developed in social work education in the Appalachian region and throughout the nation's rural areas. A number of bachelor's programs, especially after the development of baccalaureate accreditation, defined themselves as rural in orientation.

A grant to CSWE from a foundation associated with the United Parcel Service, led to the establishment of a rural project. The project created some training sessions for educators interested in rural social work, one at Indiana University and another in Denver. Out of the project also came the first edition of the book mentioned earlier and which I edited was entitled *Social Work in Rural Communities*, which included many of the early authors and speakers on the subject. The fourth edition was published by CSWE in 2004 (Ginsberg, 2005). The book is CSWE's largest seller, apart from accreditation materials. After being available for only six months, the entire first print run of the fourth edition was sold out.

There were many other types of fallout from my rural work, including being invited to provide frequent workshops, visiting professorships, and lectures. For example, in 1976, I was invited to be part of a team by Mitchell I. Ginsberg (then Dean at the Columbia University School of Social Work) as its rural specialist. We went to Iran to help that nation with their social work education and social services.

The University of Tennessee set up the first Institute on Social Work in Rural Areas, as mentioned earlier in this discussion, and invited me to be the keynote speaker. Volunteers have organized Institutes every year since 1976 in every part of the United States: the West Coast, New England, the East Coast, the Rocky Mountain states, and the Midwest, as well as the South. Many of

these events yielded proceedings that were widely distributed.

So, something of a chance encounter with Richard Lodge led to the institutionalization of a field of social work scholarship and practice concepts that might not have emerged, and changed as well as defined, much of my career as a social work educator.

Of course, there have always been challenges to my theories: "Where did you get those ideas? In my state, government wants specialized social workers, rather than generalists, in rural as well as metropolitan areas." My tendency is to simply say that I understand and agree that what I have written is neither perfect nor complete. And in recent years, although I have written and spoken and taught courses about rural social work, my interests have also been in other areas such as program evaluation, social welfare policy, and human biology. After my early writing and speaking on rural issues, I became a state government official and I wrote about that, too. But I think my major identification will long be rural social work.

I have noticed that some of the more lasting theories of social relations come out of the kinds of research that I used in my initial writings about rural social work. I think of Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People* (1965,) which was again based on his observations. And even the recent a book *Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2005), takes some data and many observations and constructs some fundamental ideas about the ways in which human beings behave in the modern United States. We sometimes talk in the field about practice wisdom, and perhaps that is the kind of research some of these works are based upon.

Possibly the kind of study and writing that went into the development of rural social work theories could be called macro research. There have been later studies, many of which are published in the fourth edition of *Social Work in Rural Communities* (Ginsberg,



2005), that sample a smaller population, analyze it, and describe the results. Those kinds of research are critical and build the knowledge base of social work. But they are not examples of what I have done in this field of study. One has the feeling that there is ample room for both—the macro study of a big issue such as life among the one-quarter of Americans who live in rural areas—as well as an examination of special populations in one community.

### Additional Scholarship

Of course, the rural social work literature has grown significantly and there are several scholars who specialize in rural issues. O. William Farley published *Rural Social Work Practice* in 1982. Scales and Streeter edited a text called *Rural Social Work* in 2004. Roger and Nancy Lohmann edited *Rural Social Work Practice* in 2005 for Columbia University Press. Emilia Martinez-Brawley (1981) has written many books and articles on rural issues. Judith A. Davenport and Joseph Davenport III (1995) have written extensively on rural issues. Paul Sundet and JoAnn Mermelstein were early contributors to the rural literature in several books and conferences, including the early editions of *Social Work in Rural Communities*.

For several years, schools of social work in Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Washington, published a journal *Human Services in the Rural Environment*, which has now gone out of existence.

### Conclusion

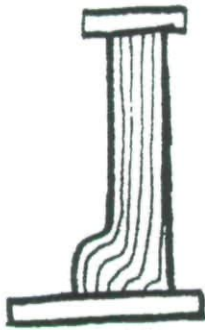
The field of rural social work scholarship has grown from a rather clear basic idea to a body of substantial theory and literature: not nearly as extensive in its scholarship as subjects such as child welfare, health, or mental health, but still an issue of major concern to a significant minority of social workers.

Rural social work is now a relatively well-developed area of scholarship for the profession. Articles, books, and at one point a professional journal, all support the field. Thousands of social work students have been specially prepared for rural practice. And virtually all social work students, both baccalaureate and master's, are prepared for generalist practice, which is the basic concept of rural social work.

So in a forty year period, the subject of rural social work and my personal association with it has been a powerful personal influence as well as an influence on social work as a professional discipline.

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