SECOND EDITION

Rural Social Work

Building and Sustaining Community Capacity

Edited by T. Laine Scales, Calvin L. Streeter, and H. Stephen Cooper

WILEY

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Second Edition

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We dedicate this volume to our children,
April Scales, Brian and Aaron Streeter, and Hayden and Savannah Cooper.
May they forever be blessed by the strength and resilience
of their country neighbors and be inspired
to preserve the land and the life for generations to come.

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Preface

T. Laine Scales, Calvin L. Streeter, and H. Stephen Cooper

Imagine you have just returned home from a brisk walk through the countryside on a warm and sunny summer day. You are hot, tired, and very thirsty. As you enter your home, you see a glass of cool, refreshing water sitting on the kitchen table. The glass is filled to the halfway mark. How do you see the glass? Is it half-full or is it half-empty?

If you are thirsty, you probably focus on the glass as half-full, and you are grateful that someone has left it for you to drink. If the water in the glass isn't enough to quench your thirst, however, you may focus on the glass as half-empty. In this case, whether you view the glass as half-full or half-empty probably doesn't matter, but how we answer the age-old question, "Is the glass half-empty or half-full?" may suggest how we perceive the world.

It has been said that perception is reality. What we believe to be true often takes over our thoughts so much that it really becomes true. When we view the glass as half-empty, we focus on the negative aspects of life, and we can become consumed with negativity and overcome with despair. But when we see the glass as half-full, we focus on the positive elements in our lives and the world around us.

John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993), in their book, *Building Communities From the Inside Out*, challenged us to view the glass as half-full rather than half-empty. They contend that our focus on the half-empty glass leads us to see only the deficiencies and problems facing our communities. In rural areas this often means we see communities where few opportunities exist to retain young people, where we are too spread out to afford hard-surface roads, good Internet access, or cable television for everyone, where residents must leave town to acquire many goods and services, and where farms and local businesses are controlled by big corporations from afar.

By viewing the glass as half-full, we begin to see the depth of the human spirit and the richness of the creative potential that exist in rural communities. We see people who are talented and experienced in a variety of areas. We see strong social networks and

associations. We see that with rural services the lines are short, the hassles are few, and our business is easy to take care of. We see beautiful landscapes where we can easily enjoy nature. We see people getting things done that need to be done by using what is available. In other words, we see the capacity for strengths and assets rather than only problems and deficiencies.

As social workers, it is easy to become overwhelmed with a sense of despair because of the serious personal problems and societal conditions we are called upon to address. We see the child who has been verbally and physically abused. We witness the terrible toll that alcohol and drug abuse can take on a family. Daily we confront the reality of poverty, prejudice, and oppression in our society. Because our professional lives are wrapped up in the misery and trauma of the less advantaged in our community, it is no wonder that social workers are sometimes accused of seeing the glass as half-empty. For social workers in rural communities where resources are scarce, it may be even more difficult to view the glass as half-full.

A view that focuses on capacity, however, allows helping professionals to see people as citizens of the community, not just as clients. Every citizen has capacities that can be tapped to make life in the community better. Rural communities contain a wide range of assets and strengths, such as voluntary associations, close personal relationships among people, local institutions, histories and traditions, and land and property. Models of professional practice that focus on capacity-building can empower rural people to use their resources in innovative ways to create new assets. It can help them determine their own direction, set their own priorities, and leverage both internal and external resources in ways that make sense for their community.

Social work has a long tradition of practice focused on strengths and assets. For example, Dennis Saleebey and his colleagues at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare have spent much of the last two decades developing, testing, and promoting a strengths perspective for social work practice (Saleebey, 2009). Drawing on the profession's commitment to building on people's strengths, rather than focusing on their deficiencies, problems, or disabilities, the strengths-based perspective provides an orientation to practice that seeks to uncover and reaffirm people's abilities, talents, survivor skills, and aspirations. It assumes that a clear and unyielding focus on the strengths found in individuals, families, neighborhoods, groups, and communities will increase the likelihood that people will reach the goals they set for themselves.

THREE STREAMS OF THOUGHT ON BUILDING CAPACITY FOR ASSETS AND STRENGTHS

In addition to the work at the University of Kansas, at least three significant streams of work during the last two decades have helped shift our focus from deficiencies to capacity. Although somewhat different in their approach, they share a common theme. All three embrace and celebrate the strengths and capacities of individuals and communities.

The first of these is the work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), mentioned previously. Their book, *Building Communities From the Inside Out*, provides a conceptual framework

for asset-based community development. In their book, Kretzmann and McKnight outline a set of tools for community practice that can be used to map assets and build capacities in our communities. At the heart of their model are relationships. From their perspective, asset mapping and capacity-building are about identifying resources and fostering relationships in the community.

In addition, Kretzmann and McKnight have established the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University to provide resources and technical support for people seeking to "build community from the inside out." Challenging the traditional approach to solving community problems, which focuses service providers and funding agencies on the needs and deficiencies of people and their communities, the ABCD Institute demonstrates that community assets are key building blocks in sustainable rural community revitalization efforts (Snow, 2001). These community assets include the skills of local residents, the power of local associations, the resources of public, private, and nonprofit institutions, and the physical and economic resources of local places. Central to their approach is the premise that every person has capacities, abilities, and gifts. The key is to identify and embrace those assets. To facilitate this process, the Institute has developed a Capacity Inventory, designed to identify the capacities of community members. The Institute now has more than 50 highly skilled practitioner/trainers who work with communities all across the country to promote asset-based community development.

A second stream of work focused on capacity-building is located at the Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In an effort to identify the elements of an asset-based approach to healthy youth development, the Search Institute devised a framework of developmental assets for children and youth. This framework identified 40 critical factors for young people's growth and development.

The assets are divided into external and internal assets. The external assets focus on positive experiences that young people receive from the people and institutions in their lives and include a supportive environment, evidence that the community values youth and their contribution to community life, clearly stated boundaries and expectations, and opportunities for constructive use of time. However, a community's responsibility for its young people does not end with the provision of external assets. There needs to be a similar commitment to nurturing the internal qualities that guide choices and create a sense of centeredness, purpose, and focus. By developing these qualities, young people increase their capacities for learning, positive values to guide their choices, social competencies to build relationships, and a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth, and promise.

When drawn together, the assets offer a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development (Benson, 1997). The developmental assets framework clearly shows the important roles that families, schools, congregations, neighborhoods, youth organizations, and others in the community play in shaping young people's lives and increasing the community's capacity for positive growth.

The Search Institute's framework of developmental assets for children and youth has caught on all across the country, with asset-building initiatives flourishing in small towns and rural communities throughout the United States. For example, in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, the THRIVE Initiative is working to spread awareness of the 40 development assets and

encourage asset-building throughout the community. In Manchester, New Hampshire, Making It Happen is helping the community view all young people as "at promise," not "at risk," by promoting healthy choices and reducing risky behaviors while building developmental assets in children and youth. In Annandale, Minnesota, Youth First is a grassroots initiative to inspire and challenge the entire community to become asset-builders for youth in the community. In Georgetown, Texas, The Georgetown Project is devoted to the framework of developmental assets as a means to build a healthy community where all children and youth can grow into capable, caring, and resilient adults. And in countless other communities across the country, the developmental asset framework is providing the foundation for youth development initiatives that emphasize the positive contribution that children and youth make in the life of the community.

The work of Dr. Mike Sherraden and his colleagues in the Center for Social Development at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, represents a third exciting area of work focused on the increasing capacity for economic well-being. With a focus on developing financial resources for poor families, Sherraden (1991) outlined his ideas about asset-based welfare policy in his seminal book titled *Assets and the Poor: A New American Welfare Policy*.

Challenging our traditional models of public assistance for low-income families, Sherraden proposed asset-building as an antipoverty strategy. He argues that existing consumption-based welfare policies make it impossible for people to get out of poverty, because they penalize families for accumulating personal economic assets. From his perspective, the way to move people out of poverty is to encourage them to increase their capacity to accumulate assets, which they can then leverage to purchase a home, capitalize a small business, or pay for an education for their children. The mechanism for doing this is something called individual development accounts (IDAs).

Sherraden and his colleagues led a national demonstration project on asset-building using IDAs called the American Dream Demonstration as the first large-scale test of the efficacy of IDAs as a route to economic independence for low-income Americans (Schreiner et al., 2001; Sherraden, 2002). Since then, IDA projects have emerged all across the United States and in many countries around the world. For example, the Community Action Partnership of Western Nebraska's IDA program called Assets Building Choices is designed to help low-income families and individuals achieve economic independence by building long-term assets. RAISE Texas supports asset-building efforts in underserved small cities and rural markets in Texas by increasing access to IDA programs and other financial mainstream products. The Rural California Asset Development Network provides supportive financial education, asset-specific training, and access to banking in poor, rural, and immigrant communities. The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 included provisions for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Individual Development Account (BFRIDA), a program designed to help beginning farmers and ranchers of limited means build the capital necessary to expand their agricultural businesses through matched savings accounts. The Native American Asset-Building Initiative supports innovative asset-building projects that feature IDAs, financial education, and related services that enable low-income Native American people to improve their economic status and become economically self-sufficient.

EXPLORING ASSET BUILDING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

We believe that practice models that keep us focused on the strengths, assets, and capacities of people are critical for social work practice in rural communities. That belief led us to create this resource for the classroom. It is designed to assist social work students and teachers as they integrate themes of capacity-building and social work practice in the rural context.

Because all three authors of this book are educators involved in the day-to-day challenge of integrating rural content into our courses with few current and classroom-friendly readings, we began to discuss with other educators what type of new resource would be useful. The ideal resource would be more than a mere collection of readings. It would be interesting and accessible for students at the BSW and MSW levels, and it would provide discussion questions and assignments to facilitate the study of the material.

We envisioned this book as a valuable educational resource on contemporary issues in rural social work practice and as a forum where scholars, students, and practitioners can share their current research and practice experience in rural communities. We reviewed other rural resources for social workers and found several ways in which we wanted this resource to be distinctive.

First, in contrast to other resources for students, these readings consistently integrate strengths, assets, and capacity-building themes, some of the newer, most talked-about theoretical foundations for social work. We have emphasized the depth of the human spirit and the richness of the creative potential that exists in rural communities. We introduce newer research tools, such as asset mapping, social network analysis, concept mapping, and geographic information systems (GIS). We also include practice models that hold special promise for rural social workers, such as wraparound and systems of care, evidence-based practice, community partnership models, and the role of faith-based organizations in rural communities. The readings highlight the tremendous resources that exist in rural communities and demonstrate ways to integrate them into contemporary social work practice.

We also address some of the most important practice issues facing rural social workers today, such as the challenges of working with stigmatized populations such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people; hospice and palliative care services; the homeless; immigration policy; and people living with HIV/AIDS. These and other contemporary practice and policy issues are very important to social workers, but they have not been addressed thoroughly in other resources on rural social work.

The intent of *Rural Social Work: Building and Sustaining Community Capacity* is to provide material for readers who are learning to use capacity-building frameworks and, at the same time, suggest ways for social workers to participate in sustaining rural communities. We expect that our readers will have a wide variety of experiences with rurality. Some of our readers may live and work in rural communities and may have read widely on rural social work. Many readers may live rural lifestyles, but perhaps they have not had an opportunity to reflect on their own cultures and how the rural environment impacts social work practice. Others may be destined for social work in urban areas, and they are preparing themselves to work with clients who have migrated to their city from rural areas. For all of these readers, our hope is that these articles, discussion questions, and assignments stimulate meaningful dialogue about how asset-building frameworks can enhance practice with rural populations.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS RESOURCE

Following this preface on asset-building perspectives and their application to community building in rural contexts, this book contains 21 chapters written by social work scholars, students, and practitioners. Each chapter includes three elements: (1) an article that integrates the themes of capacity-building and rural social work, (2) discussion questions that facilitate critical thinking around the chapter, and (3) suggested activities and assignments to provide opportunities for practical application of the concepts presented in the chapter.

The chapters are organized into five parts, with an organizing framework following curriculum areas often used by programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education:

Part 1. Conceptual and Historical Foundations of Rural Social Welfare
Part 2. Human Behavior and Rural Environments
Part 3. Practice Issues in Rural Contexts
Part 4. Policy Issues Affecting Rural Populations
Part 5. Using Research to Evaluate Practice in Rural Settings

This framework for organizing will assist teachers who wish to integrate a few readings on rural issues into each course. Students may buy the book early in their program, and instructors may use this book to supplement other textbooks, which often carry an urban focus. The work will also be useful in introductory courses in both MSW and BSW programs, as it introduces new social work students to a variety of curriculum areas they will be studying and encourages students to consider these areas within a rural context. Finally, we expect the book will be particularly well suited for the growing number of specialized courses in rural social work.

Lead teachers have written brief introductions to each of the five parts that explore the connections between the readings and the curriculum area covered in that section. These veteran teachers and scholars have prepared students and instructors for the section of readings as if they were preparing their students for a new unit in their own classes. We intend for these introductory sections to invite readers to anticipate particular themes and connections as they work through the chapters.

The discussion questions and assignments are designed to provide maximum autonomy for student learners. We believe that students should be at the center of their own learning, so we designed the activities to be used with as little or as much guidance as the teacher believes his or her particular class will need. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these assignments as they wish and to create their own questions and assignments to fit their unique contexts.

No matter how students, teachers, and practitioners might choose to use this resource, we are confident that they will find good readings, discussion questions, and assignments to help them think about rural social work in new ways. We have learned a great deal from reading and editing the work of these well-informed and experienced contributors. We hope others' experiences with this resource will be equally enjoyable and stimulating.

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Acknowledgments

We have many people to thank, beginning with the lead teachers and contributors who worked diligently to prepare and revise their work. We are grateful to the reviewers who gave helpful feedback and to Wiley's Rachel Livsey, Amanda Orenstein, and Thomas Caruso who have been so efficient and pleasant. We especially appreciate Jeanie Fitzpatrick and Rachel Whitenton for their careful attention to detail in the manuscript preparation.

Many people have inspired, guided, and influenced our professional and personal development. We call those people capacity builders. I (Laine) would like to acknowledge my dad, Charlie Scales, who, along with my mom, provided my first learning about rural communities. Growing up in rural Kentucky and North Carolina, I watched (and helped) my parents as they tirelessly gave their time and energy in building natural helping networks to sustain our small communities. I am also indebted to Dr. Donoso Escobar, my teacher and friend, who first taught me that rurality is not just a matter of where we are located geographically, but also an important cultural study, and that social workers can (and need to) do this essential work.

I (Cal) was influenced by countless asset builders, many of whom didn't know they were influencing me, who have shaped who I am today. I would like to thank all those who have helped me along the way. In particular, I want to acknowledge my parents, Lloyd and Delores Streeter. My earliest memories of rural community life center around my parents' active participation in the life of their small farming community in central Nebraska. Working together with neighbors, sharing their dreams and aspirations, influencing one another's opinions, and supporting and encouraging one another during difficult times was a normal and natural part of their life. They were and continue to be asset builders for many people, young and old. I would also like to express my gratitude to my wife, Diane, and my children, Brian and Aaron, who remind me daily of the importance of family in our ongoing journey through life.

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Conceptual and Historical Foundations of Rural Social Welfare

Paul H. Stuart

Does rural social welfare differ from urban social welfare? And do social workers who practice in rural areas or with rural people experience a different reality than that which is encountered by other social workers? If so, what are the differences, both in policy and practice? Social work is often described as an urban profession, as the origins of the profession in the United States were found in the rapidly growing urban centers during the Progressive Era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, much Progressive Era social work practice involved work with immigrants from rural Europe and migrants from rural America, who made up the populations that swelled turn-of-the-century cities. And social workers have been practicing in rural areas since at least World War I. The chapters in this section provide information on the rural roots of social welfare in the United States and some insights on what is special about social work practice with rural people. More importantly, they provide an orientation to rural social work and social welfare.

One answer to the question of what sets rural social work apart has been that rural areas—and by extension rural social welfare—can be distinguished from their urban counterparts by reference to what is lacking. Initially, the U.S. Census Bureau defined rural and urban areas by the number of people in the area. In the 1790 census, places of fewer than 2,500 people were designated as rural areas, whereas places with more than 2,500 were classified as urban. This classification continued to be used until 1991, when the Census Bureau developed a more nuanced definition. Smaller population was often associated with deficits. Thus, cities had relatively rich social welfare resources and were traditionally centers for innovation and experimentation, in contrast to rural areas, which had fewer resources and were often viewed as unchanging and set in their ways. Cities were also the locations of major social institutions, such as universities, hospitals, and religious institutions, whereas rural areas could be characterized by a lack of these amenities. Thus, much of the thinking about rural social work and social welfare emphasized the deficits that seemed to characterize rural communities.

If rural policy and practice is conceptualized from a deficit model, then the role of a social worker may be to make connections between people and the (often missing) services they need. Some rural social work practice is focused on community deficits and finding ways to work around those deficits. Such a view emphasizes what rural areas do not have, rather than the strengths of rural people and rural communities. In Chapter 1, "Down-Home Social Work: A Strengths-Based Model for Rural Practice," two social work educators, Michael R. Daley and Freddie L. Avant, state the case for a reconceptualization of rural social work practice. Instead of a focus on deficits, they argue in favor of a broader framework for rural social work practice—a generalist framework that takes into account both the person and the environment. *Rural* may be a concept that cannot be defined simply by population density or deficits in services, they suggest. Rather, a rural culture is something that people identify with, including some people who are currently living in standard metropolitan statistical areas (SMSAs), the most *urban* places, according to the current Census Bureau classification system.

In rural cultures people relate to each other in informal or personalized ways. Primary family and friendship groups are often more important than formal resources, such as agencies and other official sources of information and assistance. Social workers need to be aware of this attitude, whether they work in rural areas or in urban communities, as rural people migrate to cities, where some are in need of services. How can social workers be aware of the culture of their clients? Daley and Avant provide some clues, but because rural people self-identify as rural, the best strategy is to ask them.

The importance of informal relations in rural cultures is illustrated in Chapter 2, "Rural Is Real: History of the National Rural Social Work Caucus and the NASW Professional Policy Statement on Rural Social Work." In this chapter, rural social work practitioner Samuel A. Hickman provides a description and history of the Rural Social Work Caucus. Founded in the 1970s, the caucus, now known as the National Rural Social Work Caucus, represents the interests of rural social work practitioners and social work educators who focus on rural practice. The caucus has encouraged attention to rural issues by the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, and other organizations, and was responsible for the 1981, 2002, and 2011 Professional Policy Statements on Rural Social Work, which were adopted by the National Association of Social Workers Delegate Assembly. The caucus is less formally organized than many other professional organizations, but it gets a lot done, as Hickman shows.

The history of social welfare policy in the United States reflects the nation's varying attitude toward rural areas. In Chapter 3, "Social Welfare and Rural People: From the Colonial Era to the Present," I, Paul Stuart (chapter author), trace the development of social welfare in the United States as the nation evolved from a predominantly rural and agricultural country to a modern urban and industrialized nation. The locus for social welfare activity and innovation shifted from the local community to the state and eventually to the nation, while the view of rural areas shifted as well. Initially viewed as ideal democratic communities, rural areas were increasingly seen as backward and isolated during the 20th century. Along with rapid urban development, a deficit view of rural communities came to dominate discussions.

Rural and frontier areas were stimulated by the enactment of the "Western measures" of the 1862 Congress. The Homestead Act, the Land Grant College Act, the Department of

Agriculture Act, and the Pacific Railroad Act represented major social investments that transferred assets in the form of land, education, research, and transportation to frontier settlers and rural residents in general. Corresponding asset-building measures may be needed to revitalize rural communities in the 21st century.

As Americans came to view rural areas as backward, another function of rural communities suggested itself. Urban problems—or urban people who had problems—could be moved to rural areas, where they could be "out of sight, out of mind." Mental hospitals, prisons, and other institutions were located in rural areas, far away from population centers. From the "orphan trains" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps and Great Society Job Corps programs of the mid-20th century, Americans have endeavored to relocate urban people with problems to rural areas. In part, this reflected a belief in the restorative powers of rural environments, but it also reflected a desire to remove problems far away from an increasingly urban society.

In Chapter 4, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Rural Social Work and African American Women at Efland Home for Girls, 1920–1938," Tanya Brice describes a rural residential facility for African American girls established by the North Carolina Federation of Colored Women, an organization composed of middle-class African American women who engaged in a variety of works designed to "lift up" African American people in the early 20th century. The Efland Home for Girls provided a way to remove girls who were viewed as having problems from their environment to a rural refuge, where they could be cared for and prepared for adult life. In this case, which was not unusual, particularly in Southern states where African American people had access to few services, Brice shows that the Efland Home served both to remove girls from problematic environments and provide them with education and vocational training. But isolating these "wayward" girls far from familiar environments served another function—that of removing them from their home communities so they could be "out of sight, out of mind."

These four chapters provide an introduction and orientation to rural social welfare and rural social work practice. They represent a variety of points of view, yet they still do not provide every possible way of looking at rural social work. They do provide a basis on which you can begin your exploration of social work and social welfare in rural communities.

CHAPTER 1

Down-Home Social Work

A Strengths-Based Model
for Rural Practice

Michael R. Daley and Freddie L. Avant

Historically, social work developed from urban roots and paid relatively little attention to the issues and concerns related to rural populations (Daley & Avant 2004b; Ginsberg, 2011; NASW, 2012). Interest in rural social work appears to have originated around the early years of the 20th century and initially focused on community-based issues involving the need for better infrastructure in areas, such as promoting the development of electricity, education, and health care (Galen & Alexander, 2011; Martinez-Brawley, 1980). Given these origins, it is not surprising that rural social work developed a strong emphasis on community-based practice that focused on addressing a shortage of community resources, which continues to the present (Barker, 2003; Ginsberg, 1998; Martinez-Brawley, 1990; Southern Regional Education Board, 1998; York, Denton, & Moran, 1998). Thus, the typical portrayal of rural social work practice is that it is an activity occurring in areas of low population density, and that the problems of rural people stem from the physical environment or geographic location wherein resources are sparse.

Although this perspective has been helpful in directing attention to the service needs of long-neglected rural communities and the people who live in them, it has been somewhat limiting in advancing both the practice and educational development of knowledge and skills of rural social workers. Specifically, the development of literature regarding social work with rural individuals, families, groups, and organizations has lagged far behind that of macro practice for addressing organizations and communities.

Rural social work is and should be viewed more broadly than community-based work. Rural social work at a fundamental level is work with rural people as well as practice in and with rural communities (Daley & Avant, 2004a; Ginsberg, 2011). This perspective suggests the use of both the person-in-environment and the multisystem focus that is so critical for social work practice. In the past, by concentrating on the rural community aspects of practice, we tended to overlook the interaction between the rural environment and other systems that influence behavior. Indeed, the cultural or lifestyle issues relating to rural people in terms of individual, family, group, and organizational systems translate into behavior that may be as

important as the community environment in understanding the problems of and in shaping social work practice in this context (Daley & Avant, 2004b).

The purpose of this chapter is to present a broad-based model for rural social work practice that addresses a comprehensive strengths-based approach to effective work with rural people in this important arena of practice. The chapter will explore traditional views of rural communities and rural social work. Additionally, it will address ways in which these traditional definitions can be broadened to enhance the understanding of rural social work. Within this context, a model for rural social work will be presented, along with implications for this expanded model for social work practice and education.

DEFINING RURAL

Rurality, or the presence of rural characteristics, is clearly the context for rural social work, just as mental health, health care, families and children, education, and corrections provide the context for other fields of social work practice. It is often unclear what elements differentiate the rural from nonrural as a context for social work practice. In part, this lack of clarity has arisen because of multiple definitions of rurality that currently exist. Thus, the term *rural* is not consistently used by everyone. The traditional way in which rurality is defined is based both on geography and population density. This method is defined by the Census Bureau and has many attractive features. The Census definitions are widely used, and they are appealing because they are absolute in that they unambiguously and clearly classify a region as either rural or nonrural, and all except the most recent definition of rurality classify rural as part of a rural–urban dichotomy.

Perhaps the most traditional definition of rurality is that used by the U.S. Census Bureau prior to 1991. By this definition, a rural community was one with a population of fewer than 2,500 people living in either incorporated or unincorporated areas. Communities of 2,500 or larger were classified as urban. This was a long-standing definition dating from the period when the country was primarily rural, and it became somewhat outdated with the growth of the country's population.

In 1991, a more functional definition for rurality was developed by the U.S. Census Bureau. This definition moved away from the dichotomous rural–urban approach and viewed communities on a rural–urban continuum. *Metropolitan* and *nonmetropolitan* became preferred terms as opposed to *rural* and *urban*. Metropolitan communities were those that had a central city population of 50,000 or more. Metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) were communities formed by the core city and the county in which the central city was located. Nonmetropolitan or rural communities consisted of everything lying outside of the MSAs (Davenport & Davenport, 1995; Ginsberg, 1998; Olaveson, Conway, & Shaver, 2004).

Changes for the year 2000 census shifted the rural and urban definitions once again (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Under these criteria, there are new classifications for urbanized areas (UAs) and urban clusters (UCs). UAs consist of a densely settled core of census block groups along with surrounding census blocks that encompass a population of at least 50,000 people. UCs consist of a densely settled core of census blocks along with adjacent densely settled

census blocks that have a population of at least 2,500 but fewer than 50,000 people. Using this method, rural populations are classified as those not residing in either UAs or UCs. The latter definition is helpful in that it moves away from the rural–urban dichotomy by adding a classification of the UC that corresponds to small- to medium-sized communities.

Further complexity is added when other methods of rural–urban classification are considered. For example, some classification models use population density, commuting patterns, the economy, and "open country" as identifiers of rurality (Olaveson et al., 2004). These complexities of defining rurality can be bewildering for the practicing social worker.

What can be concluded from all of these definitions is that the rural population of the United States is considerable, although clearly a minority. Ginsberg (2011) indicates that the rural population in the United States is between one-fifth and one-fourth of the total population, or 60 million to 75 million people. This substantial population needs the services that social workers deliver.

The percentage of the population that is rural is not uniform nationwide and varies considerably by state and by region. In some states, such as North Dakota, the majority of the population lives in rural areas. High concentrations of rural people are also found in the West and South regions of the United States. Even states with large metropolitan populations have substantial numbers of rural people within their boundaries (Daley & Avant, 2004b).

RURALITY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

What is a social worker to make of this complexity, and how does it help in identifying a rural context for practice? The practical fact is that social workers are neither demographers nor economists, and many of these approaches to rurality cloud rather than clarify the issue. Generally, social workers are more concerned with addressing the needs of clients and addressing social ills than in classifying societal structure. And nowhere in these methods of classifying rurality does it effectively address the individual, family, or group that self identifies as "country folk," or rural. There is often an implicit assumption that rurality lies within the community and not within the person.

However, as social workers we can often attest that rural characteristics and behaviors remain strong with people even after they move to the city. People may continue to identify themselves as country or rural and refer to their customs, institutions, and means of interacting with others as "down-home." There may be some wisdom in the old saying, "You can take the girl (or boy) out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl (or boy)."

Rural sociologists have long viewed rurality as rural environment structure composed of occupations, ecology, and sociocultural elements (Daley, 2010). All of these structures in some way translate into behaviors that may be the concerns of social workers, particularly when these behaviors result in problems in living and adapting to the environment.

Traditionally, this has led us to approach rurality by attempting to identify the salient characteristics that define rural social work where the focus has been on community characteristics, such as lack of transportation; nondiversified economies; poor housing, education, and health care; poverty; shortage of professionals; and lack of services. In the

past few years, additional concerns about rural communities have emerged that include decaying infrastructures, withdrawal of essential services, and a weak communications infrastructure for cellular phones and broadband connections. Although these are all important problems in rural America, they are all deficits. Too little attention has been focused on the community assets and strengths that may be used in addressing these problems and in building a positive perspective from which rural social workers could practice.

There are clearly some differences between rural and urban communities, from a social work perspective, but this tends to ignore major differences that exist between other important systems that influence social problems, rural behaviors, and the responses to them. In other words, definitions of rurality that focus primarily on population or community characteristics lead us to an environmental perspective with community-based interventions, whereas a person-in-environment perspective may lead us to develop smaller system interventions that fit within the environmental context.

It is much more likely that sociobehavioral-based definitions of rurality would be beneficial for the practice of social work. As Daley and Avant (2004a, 2004b) indicate, "Rural practice is social work both in and with rural communities, and it is also social work with rural people." Ginsberg (2005) also supports the idea that we should examine human behavior and problems in the rural environment from a person-in-environment perspective and consider the social problems of rural populations as stemming from both the physical environment and from a sociocultural or rural lifestyle perspective. Honestly, stereotypes of rural people and communities as simple and pure were never accurate, and both life and relationships in a rural community are often every bit as complex as those of their urban counterparts.

So what is the most practical approach to identifying rurality in the practice arena? To begin, one should avoid the trap of thinking of a rural–urban dichotomy. As Daley (2010) states, neither purely rural nor purely urban communities exist, and they are more accurately categorized as lying somewhere along a continuum, with elements of each. Then Daley and Pierce (2011) and Ginsberg (2005) suggest that using cultural and behavioral norms of the people as well as community characteristics are the most effective means of practicing social work with rural people and communities. Daley and Pierce (2011) add that in social work practice, cultural and behavioral factors should be of primary concern, and the use of population figures should be secondary. They go on to identify some important considerations in determining rurality, including "Do the residents of a community think of themselves as rural and possess rural attributes and behaviors?" and if the answers to these questions are yes, then the people are probably rural.

This kind of approach moves us away from the idea of a rural–urban dichotomy and helps us to develop a broad-based framework for rural practice that is behaviorally based. Rural and urban practice share many elements, and making an either-or distinction is not all that useful for practice purposes. The key point is that rural communities are not all alike, and this is also the case with urban communities. It is perhaps easiest to point out the differences between communities in the extremes, say between a city of 1 million and a small town of 800. But where does this leave us when assessing the differences between a city of 55,000 and a town of 30,000? The differences there are not so clear.

Given all of this information, how might we view rurality in a different light that is more productive in building a framework for rural social work practice? At this point, it is appropriate to consider a multisystem model that incorporates cultural or lifestyle perspectives for social work practice with rural communities.

A MULTISYSTEM MODEL FOR DOWN–HOME (RURAL) SOCIAL WORK

Although traditional definitions of rurality provide a starting point for formulating a framework for rural social work practice, these definitions often do not reflect the complexity of working with both rural people and communities. In order to address this complexity, a broader multidimensional framework is needed. This more comprehensive framework does not negate the existing definitions of rurality as underlying principles of rural practice. Rather, the model would build on existing definitions, broadening and enriching them, and increasing their relevance for social work with rural people. The model can consider not only the characteristics of the community, but also the interactions among systems in the community, utilizing a strengths-based perspective. Existing models tend to identify the rural context through census-based definitions, but they do not provide rural social workers with consistent approaches for analyzing the interactions that occur among social systems in the rural environment.

This leads us to consider a somewhat different framework for rural social work practice than has been traditionally used. This model of practice is one in which economics, population density, and geography still play a part, but are not entirely sufficient. Rather, it proceeds from a multisystems person-in-environment and systems-based perspective. The interactions among these systems are crucial for reflecting the complexity of rural people and communities and understanding the origin of problems so that intervention strategies can be developed. We should understand that the interactions and transactions exchanges among these systems are based on principles of social exchange, and these exchanges are key to understanding how to work effectively with rural people and in rural communities. We know that in rural communities, the nature of social exchange tends to be informal or personal, as opposed to the formal exchanges and relationships that exist in urban communities.

These informal relationships are, in fact, strengths, because they represent affirmative coping skills in rural communities where formal agencies and services often either do not exist or are difficult to access. The model also incorporates the strengths perspective to identify existing coping skills and community-based assets while still maintaining a problem-solving approach. This too differs from traditional rural social work models that tend to focus on what personal deficits exist or community resources are missing.

To address all of these issues, the authors suggest using the model presented in Figure 1.1. This model is based on three principles. The first is the multisystems, or generalist, approach to effectively adapt to the needs of rural people and the rural community and to address social problems in the appropriate environmental context. The second principle is that of analyzing social exchange among systems to assess and design appropriate interventions. This addresses the point made in the rural literature that social interactions in rural communities often take a slightly different form than is commonly seen in the urban environment. The