PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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Social work is at an important stage in its development. All professions must be responsive to changing social and economic conditions if they are to meet the needs of those they serve. This series focuses on sound practice and the specific contribution which social workers can make to the well-being of our society.

The British Association of Social Workers has always been conscious of its role in setting guidelines for practice and in seeking to raise professional standards. The conception of the Practical Social Work series arose from a survey of BASW members to discover where they, the practitioners in social work, felt there was the most need for new literature. The response was overwhelming and enthusiastic, and the result is a carefully planned, coherent series of books. The emphasis is firmly on practice set in a theoretical framework. The books will inform, stimulate and promote discussion, thus adding to the further development of skills and high professional standards. All the authors are practitioners and teachers of social work representing a wide variety of experience.

JO CAMPLING

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PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

Series Editor: Jo Campling

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*For Sue and Barbara,
Robin, Isobel, Juliet, Jamie, Barnaby*

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Introduction

The seeds of this book were sown in the early 1980s when we were both working at the National Institute for Social Work. Community work as a purposeful process of working with or for communities had existed in rural areas to a limited extent since the 1920s but the late 1970s saw a more rapid growth.

We were aware, however, that expansion in rural community work practice had not been matched by thinking or writing about the principles which lay behind the practice. There had been an increasing understanding about a wide range of rural problems (housing, service provision, agricultural change, etc.) and about policies and solutions, and people were calling for greater community involvement in addressing these issues. Yet, with very few exceptions, there had been little attention given to the 'how and why' of rural community work in any depth.

It was not until the late 1980s, when we met again in the North of England, that the book began to take shape. It soon became apparent that a manual of community work skills and methods would not be enough. Rural community work, in its various forms, is a practice which is conditioned by the geography of rural areas, the social structure and culture of villages and small country towns, the values prevalent in community groups and agencies, traditions, and the resources which are available. In order to make choices about what to do and how to do it, it is necessary to understand those factors which condition rural community work practice, and we have therefore included appropriate material about this context. A key feature of this book is that it brings together ideas and information about community development and other types of intervention, much of which has been drawn from situations which are urban, with material about issues, communities and agencies which is specifically rural.

Geographically, we have drawn on material from all parts of the UK and, to a lesser extent, from mainland Europe and further afield. We have not confined ourselves to any particular sort of agency or discipline. In our travels, we spoke to social workers, youth workers, adult education workers, clergy and planners, as well as community workers – both paid and voluntary. The fact that community work focuses on people means that the appearance of this book in a practical social work series has a special relevance but we would not argue that social work is necessarily of greater significance than any other avenue into the practice of rural community work.

Community work is a process of helping groups in the community to develop, in order to tackle their needs, disadvantage or inequality. Community work helps people to identify their needs, to come together in a group, to be supported in the action which they decide to take in order to achieve their goals. It is a learning process, encouraging people collectively to improve their skills, confidence, awareness and understanding, in order to acquire resources and influence. Often, the issues may span a number of different fields, such as health, social services, education, housing, employment, the environment, recreation, the arts. Community work is also concerned with making the services of statutory, voluntary and private organisations more flexible, relevant and responsive to people's needs and demands.

Many of the features of rural community work practice are common to all sorts of environment, but there are also some significant differences which contrast with the classic community work model which has emerged from neighbourhood work in inner city and peripheral urban estate settings. The classic model depends upon proximity, contact and access, both between members of the community, and between the community and the community worker. This model emphasises that the community worker has to spend a great deal of time within the neighbourhood which he or she serves: gaining the trust of local people, being available, and being on the spot to help individuals and groups through the processes of development and problem-solving. However, this degree of availability is rarely possible in rural areas.

Assumptions of planners and policy-makers about the concentration of needs and problems do not hold good in rural areas. Rural neighbourhoods are rarely so homogeneous, and those

individuals who are deprived may well be hidden: either as a result of physical isolation, or by their own reluctance to let their neighbours see that they have problems, or by the actions of better-off residents in the same neighbourhood working to gloss over, or even suppress, local expressions of need or deprivation.

Community work is as dependent as any other 'social intervention' on the availability of human resources, and in rural areas these rarely match up to what might be expected in urban areas. Because of these factors, the reality of rural community work is that most workers have no alternative but to cover a wide geographical area. Possibilities for adopting a neighbourhood-based approach are far from being the norm in rural areas.

Faced with these opportunities and limitations, rural community work has evolved appropriate strategies and a set of tools to cope. They include the skills and techniques of supporting groups at arm's length: via the telephone, correspondence, newsletters, irregular face-to-face contact. Methods are used to penetrate the surface gloss of rural communities, to reach those in need and help them find effective solutions. Special ways are developed for working with the small or scattered communities of many rural areas, where the incidence of common problems and of people able and willing to take action is often low. So, too, are techniques for the workers to take the initiative.

At the heart of this book is a model of rural community work practice. This is explained in Chapter 4, and in the following three chapters we examine its various elements in more detail. These are set in the context of the geography and social and political structures of rural areas, the agencies involved, the resources available and the ethos of rural development. The book will be of interest to community workers and community work students and also those in related fields, such as clergy, volunteer organisers, social workers, youth workers, adult educationists, environmentalists, primary health care teams, etc. It is also of relevance to those who control the resources for rural community work at local and national level, and those involved in other aspects of rural development who may be interested to learn more about the significance of community-based action to their work.

The book is applicable to community work in a variety of settings. Rural areas and communities differ widely, from the apparently wealthy commuter villages which are close to most

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towns and cities, through to the remote, marginal and often poorer upland areas. We have tried to take account of the less common situations – the old mining communities, new villages, urban estates in the countryside – as well as classic farming or fishing villages. Inevitably we make generalisations, but every community *is* different, and no community worker should try to rely on a textbook as a substitute for what they should learn from first-hand experience of direct observation and interaction.

Acknowledgements

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We have also been given special help by two national organisations. CDF provided the secretariat for the project and ACRE gave encouragement and practical help, and made available their library. Kevin Harris, CDF's Information Officer, also chased up books and articles, and Ann Nicholls at CDF's Leeds office provided welcome administrative support. Above all, Elisabeth Haarhaus of Leeds did sterling work on her wordprocessor. Her efficiency and patience during the re-drafting period were particularly appreciated.

The inspiration and examples for the book have come directly from practitioners throughout the United Kingdom. In 1989, we held a skills exchange workshop which drew in specially invited, experienced rural community workers from a variety of agencies and settings. During that same year, we travelled extensively to visit local community work projects and agencies, which greatly enhanced our appreciation of life at the sharp end, as well as telling us more about the issues involved.

During the preparation and writing of this book we became increasingly aware of the variety of rural practitioners with whom we were in contact, and of the amount of detailed material about

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practice we had accumulated. Accordingly, a collection of case studies -*Rural Action – A Collection of Community Work Case Studies* (Henderson and Francis 1992) was produced. We are very pleased that such a practice volume grew out of our contact with rural community workers.

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DAVID FRANCIS
PAUL HENDERSON