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# Service Centers: The Neglected Role of the Town<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The dichotomy of urban and rural areas does not fit the circumstances of contemporary social life in the United States. Although needy populations redistributed across the social landscape, almost no social service agencies serving rural populations are, or ever have been, located in either urban (city) or rural (countryside) areas. Social agencies serving rural populations are nearly always located in towns. The town is a unique and distinctive rural social, economic and political institution. An adequate approach to conceptualizing “Rural social work” must begin with recognition of one of the fundamental insights of contemporary urban theory: the regional character of social, economic and political life and the role of towns as regional service centers. This year marks the seventeenth anniversary of the rural social work movement, which began at the Knoxville conference in July, 1976. Such an anniversary is an occasion to look back at what we have accomplished and to look ahead at what remains to be done and how the task has evolved. *(This edition of the paper includes an updated bibliography on a broad range of international rural and town studies sources. Except for citations noted in the paper, this literature has not been reviewed in the writing of this paper.)*

## Introduction

As I look back over the past seventeen years, I see a rural social work education movement largely preoccupied with three things: First and foremost, there has been a continuous preoccupation from the very start with defining the meaning of “rural” in an increasingly urban world. Secondly, in what amounts to a mirror image of the larger world of “urban” Social Work Education, there has been a preoccupation with defining the uniqueness of rural social work practice. Defining any practice as uniquely rural, of course, depends completely on being able to define rural in a satisfactory manner. This task has proven remarkably difficult, and one might suggest, ultimately impossible. Given the lack of consensus on this issue, it should surprise no one that no clear conception of uniquely rural social work practice has yet emerged. Finally, over the past 15 years, one can see a rather remarkable consistency of concern with two central rural phenomena: The

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characteristic troubles and problems of rural client populations and the existing resources and resource deficiencies of rural communities.

Distinguishing rural and urban populations and samples is one of the stable reference points of the social science research on Individual troubles and social problems. A quick preliminary search of the latest Psychological Abstracts CD-ROM disk in our library, for example, turned up thousands of references to “rural”. I would venture to guess that virtually all of them are using rural as a population or sample descriptor in examination of attitudes, behavior or other personal attributes of the individual. The general drift of such research clearly supports a thesis of urban -rural differences; rural samples of many different client populations are almost inevitably poorer, sicker, die younger and are generally more problem-prone than urban samples, unless those urban samples are selected specifically from the urban underclass.

In this sense, a simple dichotomy between urban and rural has not been an impediment to understanding people’s problems. If anything, focusing on rural and urban differences has provided a rallying point for rural health, mental health, aging services and other fields of practice. At the same time, the value of dichotomizing rural and urban communities is more problematic. The concept of “rural communities” is impossibly vague and represents a major impediment to resolving any of the central questions of rural social work practice. Nothing makes this more clear than the continuing futile debate over the proper community size to use as the definite cut point between urban and rural. In the past 15 years, the papers presented at this conference have alternately raged, cajoled, pleaded and responded in a dozen different ways to this seemingly crucial definitional question. The net impact has been minimal at best.

In quibbling over the nuances of the census data, it is easy to miss the larger point: In 1990, there were 57 million people living in the United States outside metropolitan areas. While that may be down from the 66 million nonmetropolitan residents of 1960, it is still a population larger than the entire nations of Korea, France or Italy. Further, traditional community life as we have experienced it in the communities of rural America shows no signs whatsoever of disappearing completely.

This paper is a call for a redirection and new focus for rural social work studies in the U.S. We need to look beyond the false dichotomization of life in the United States into “urban” and “rural” and focus more on the connections between the various connotations of urban and the multiple connotations of rural. The single most important and most overlooked connection between contemporary rural and urban life is the town; a form of settlement and community which is so fundamental to the makeup of rural America that for the past seventeen years, rural social work educators, like others, have virtually taken it for granted.

What we choose to call rural communities and rural areas in the United States today are made up of towns and the surrounding countryside – the territory

surrounding them, whether agricultural land, forests, open grasslands or deserts. These towns and their hinterlands are bound inextricably together – and tied importantly to networks of larger urban concentrations – by the commercial and communication nexus that binds them together – as evident by the pickup trucks, electrical grids, telephone systems, television and radio networks that link them with the rest of the nation.<sup>2</sup> That was inherent in the original design of the New England town planners of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and it was largely been realized by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of “scientific farming” and the transformation of American agriculture from a subsistence economy to the prevailing market economy.

While we take the town largely or granted, it is quite easy to identify possible alternative configurations for contemporary rural America. Had the early patterns of the Dutch or Virginia colonies prevailed, for example, rural America today might easily consist of large estates or plantations with peasant villages and slave quarters. Had the Spanish settlement patterns dictated in the Laws of the Indies prevailed, there would be far fewer settlements in rural America, and the Renaissance cities would be characterized by plazas, Cathedrals, governor’s palaces along the lines of contemporary Santee Fe or Taos. But what actually occurred was the blending of agricultural village and renaissance urban places where people “from town” and people “from the country” or the area surrounding the town easily mingle. “Going into town” are approximately equivalent events in the lives rural town dwellers and residents of the countryside. By contrast, for either group going to the next nearest big city is a special occasion or big event.

The total number of large and small towns existing in rural America today numbers in the tens (possibly hundreds) of thousands. Moreover, there is a uniform underlying rationality or social and economic order to rural areas which the current rural social work literature largely fails to grasp. Contemporary urban theory calls such areas peripheries and towns cores. In my home town, we simply called it “the country”. In either case, the idea is the same: The fairly dense settlement of a town is located within a more sparsely settled territory or region surrounding it and the two together make up a rural area with important meaning in the everyday lives of those who lived there.

The early social area studies in the Midwest developed a method for precisely defining the social area surrounding any particular town. It involved checking outwards from a town to see on which side of farm driveways the gravel was piled highest. A higher gravel ridge on the far side of the driveway meant that drivers routinely turned toward the town, and when the gravel ridge changed sides it meant that drivers from that farm were turning in the opposite direction (toward another town).

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<sup>2</sup> Retrospectively, we can also add to that the cell phone, satellite and internet that have further solidified these linkages between urban and rural that were already plain as day in the 1990 – and in 1958 when Vidich and Bensman wrote the first edition of *Small Town in Mass Society*.

What we have not taken sufficient advantage of in rural social work, however, is the additional insights of regional science and metropolitan economics. Not only should we expect to find different functional regions (trade areas, school districts, CMHC catchment areas, etc.) surrounding towns. We can also expect to find that clusters of towns are arranged hierarchically within the peripheries of larger or more important (economically or politically) towns and that these towns, in turn, are within the orbit or even larger towns and cities.

Thus, in the North Central West Virginia region, for example, rural folk may live outside the town of Rowlesburg in Preston County where they buy their groceries and attend elementary school. They pay their local taxes in the county seat of Kingwood, where the county court house, county high school, general hospital, senior center and hospice are located. Rowlesburg, like all of Preston County is within the periphery of Morgantown which is the source of more intensive health services, more general social services and shopping and for certain specialized commercial, health, human and other services they may go to Pittsburgh.

## Villages

Agrarian villages the world over are generally regarded as products of the agricultural revolution within the last 10,000 years. Unlike mobile bands of hunter-gatherers, agriculture made possible settled populations and permanent settlements (Childe, 1950).<sup>3</sup> The archetypical agrarian village is a very small settlement, largely autonomous from larger social units or territories, and characterized by a limited range of social, economic and political stratification. There are ordinarily only a few social classes or status groups, a relatively flat status hierarchy and a limited division of labor and range of occupations. Stratification and labor are both closely tied to the land, with free holders (land owners), tenants or renters and landless laborers comprising three stock socioeconomic groups. Agrarian villages also tend to be places where householders live and work in the same place. Traditional cultural elements tend to predominate and material and symbolic culture tend to be passed from one generation to the next largely unchanged. Fields, forests or meadows may be held in common, but there is no "real estate" (or commercially available land) as such and no public land. There is also a high degree of local intermarriage and few "outside" kinship connections. All in all, there are remarkably few genuine villages, in the above sense, in the United States. Instead, we have towns, at least in the elemental sense of a village integrated into a market economy.

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<sup>3</sup> Recent archeological evidence developed since the original version of this paper was written, however, is bringing this theory of urbanization into question. The religious site of Gobekli Tepe in rural Turkey, in particular, may be the earliest large-scale religious site in the world – dating to 9000 BC. There is no evidence of any permanent settlement or urbanization in the adjoining area. Instead, the temple complex is currently thought to have been constructed – and later buried – by groups of hunter gatherers. This has led some urban theorists to call for a reordering of the familiar sequence: religion giving rise to agriculture and permanent settlement rather than the reverse. The actual historical sequence has little significance, however, for our understandings of the role of towns in rural areas,

## Towns

Towns are intermediate settlements between such villages and larger, more complex cities. In that sense, they are truly both urban and rural in character, almost regardless of size. As a result, towns are, by definition not autonomous, but integrated into hierarchies of settlements. Max Weber and others have suggested that the existence of markets may be the most fundamental expression of this integration. The integration of towns tends to take physical expression through its trade routes--rivers, ports, railroads and highways. Towns tend to be larger in size than villages -- in terms of more people, more households, and covering more territory. Indeed, it is fundamentally consistent with contemporary U.S. Census geography to suggest an additional distinction implicit in the literature between "small" and "large" towns .

Many towns are also differentiated from villages as "seats" or locations for particular institutions, establishments or formal organizations. There are, for example, more than 3,000 counties or parishes in the United States and each one has a "county seat" or location of county government. Other "seats" include churches or cathedrals, colleges or schools, and a vast range of residential treatment and other social welfare facilities, including sanatoria, children's homes.

The character of towns is, like human personality, formed and changed by "shaping moments", past occurrences which have left a continuing imprint on how its residents and sometimes outsiders see the town. The character of the small New England town of Concord, for example, was forever shaped by the simultaneous residence there of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott.

Sometimes the defining moment is a singular achievement or a great opportunity and sometimes it is a disaster. Monongah and Farmington WV have since been associated with the mine disasters which occurred there, and Parsons will long recall the devastating floods of 1985. "It is extraordinary how dominant the inheritance from these shaping moments can be... Towns act as extraordinary articulate records of the life that has been lived in them. A town plan is a metaphor of what the town has wanted to be and what it has become." (Nicholson and Morter, 11)

The nineteenth century American concept of the town was imported, like so many other things from Great Britain through New England. The French and Spanish sought to build cities, with cathedrals and palaces on the plaza instead. The idea is not completely original with the British, however. At least some of the native Amerindians had their own ideas about town planning, as is clearly evident from the pueblos (towns in Spanish) of New Mexico and Arizona.

"The idea of the town, along with the cabbage, the turnip, the parsnip, the poppy, the pansy, the rose and the goose, was introduced into Britain by the Romans." The Romans saw town planning as more than an exercise in imperial rationality. For them, it was in some way a ritual and symbolic act. (Nicholson and Morter, 16) "The architecture of the Romans was, from first to last, an art of

shaping space around ritual." (Brown, 1961, 9, as quoted by Scully, 1991, 109) "There were three elements of critical importance (in the symbolism of Roman towns): the boundary, the centre and the two main streets that crossed there." (Nicholson and Morter, 16) This concept of a "crossroads" at the center of town remains an important feature of many contemporary towns in the U.S. Such roads are an important (indeed, a defining) characteristic of towns, linking them to a territory, hinterland or periphery of which they are the center, and at the same time to a broader hierarchy of larger more important towns in whose periphery they reside.

Another of the characteristics of towns which sets them apart from cities is a fundamental (and visible) unity: It is possible to take in, perceive or grasp the totality of a town, whether physically or socially, in ways one cannot comprehend the entirety of cities: One cannot simply see all of New York or Los Angeles any more than one can hope to comprehend the meaning and the fabric of the lives of all the people living there. The higher you get, in a plane or a satellite, the more the ordinary details of city life are lost. Close up one can only ever see a tiny fraction of the totality of the city. While you may not always fully or truly comprehend the life of a town, there is still the sense that this is possible.

In this sense, the Roman concept of boundaries is still an appropriate one for towns. Even in large towns, where it may no longer be possible to visually experience the town as a whole, community institutions -- newspapers, schools, downtown areas and the like -- reinforce it.

The nonprofit or voluntary sector and particularly the distinctive nonprofit and voluntary institutions which I call "the commons" are an important part of town life, past and present. Commons, in the sense I use the term, consist of organizations and groups characterized by voluntary (no coercive) membership and participation, shared purposes, shared resources, mutuality and norms of fairness. Commons may include religious, cultural or civic associations, support groups, charitable organizations.

In many towns, the churches are often the second bastions (after kinship ties) of diversity and pluralism in which might otherwise be a rather oppressive sameness of town life. Rather than being simply Johnsons or Lohmanns, are also fundamentally Methodists or Lutherans, Catholics or Baptists. Indeed, religion is often the first (and sometimes, unfortunately, the last) experience of "otherness" for many town dwellers.

In the past several years, I have become quite interested in small town disaster relief committees, as illustrated by the paper Craig Johnson and I are presenting at this conference. The voluntary relief committee formed in the aftermath of tragedy is one of the most distinctive institutions of the town commons. Whether we look at the Boston smallpox epidemic of 1631, the Monongah Mine Disaster of 1907, the Buffalo Creek tragedy of 1972 or responses of West Virginia towns in 22 counties to the floods of 1985, the picture is roughly the same:

Local volunteers, coordinated by a group of leading citizens, organize themselves to aid the victims, broadcast their needs to the outside world and mediate between the community and the outside responses. (Johnson and Lohmann, 1992)

Indeed, it is the presence of a responsive community leadership able and willing to shoulder such responsibilities which distinguishes the true "town" (along with the city) from what used to be called "less civilized places." The small community unable to organize a volunteer fire department, emergency medical technician corps or a disaster relief committee has ceased to be a town in one important sense. One of the fundamental questions for those of us interested in life in rural areas is whether the number of dying towns we see today is a sign of the overall decline of rural America. An alternative possibility is that, like the process of gentrification in urban neighborhoods, some type of reversal or renewal will occur.

One of the remarkable facets of American town life has been the tendencies of certain ethnic groups to gravitate to, or away from, the towns and for others to be concentrated primarily in inner cities. American Jews, for example, have long been markedly urban, although there are notable exceptions in the Jewish communities of the small town south. Perhaps the most remarkable population migration of the present century has been the transformation of American black population from a predominantly rural to predominantly urban. The pieties of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* notwithstanding it seems unlikely that the majority of American blacks have ever been townspeople. Most went straight from the farms and sharecropper tenancy of the South to the anonymity and comparative freedom of the city.

Likewise, it is interesting how the pre-Columbian settlement patterns of the Amerindian town dwellers appear to have carried over. The pueblo peoples of New Mexico and Arizona and the peoples of the Five Nations, for example, were town dwellers before the Europeans arrived, and they still show marked tendencies toward town life. By contrast, few of the plains tribes who once roamed freely across the mid-continent now reside in any midwestern towns; opting instead for the extremes of life on the rural reservations or inner city neighborhoods of Minneapolis, Chicago and Omaha.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the most recent wave of Asian immigration to the United States has been the manner in which so many Vietnamese, Cambodians, Koreans, and others -- have taken up town life rather than cities.

## The Impasse

As long as we continue to insist upon the false and misleading stance that urban and rural are poles in a singular dichotomy the impasse in social work practice theory and education will remain unresolvable. The conclusions of Nooe and Bolito (1982) a decade ago remain essentially accurate today: Definitions of rural social work are still needed today that address what is *different* about rural problems and

rural practice and the nature of rural interventions. It is still not clear that unique principles of practice specific to rural settings can or will be identified. The tendency in too much of the literature still is to define practice principles that turn out to be equally applicable to practice in urban settings; particularly to intact older inner city neighborhoods, while cosmetically applying the term “rural” to these principles and practices. And, much of the rural social work literature still “comes largely from subjective program descriptions, individual experiences and reviews of literature rather than from empirical research” (Nooe & Bolito, 1982, 16).

The argument of this paper would probably not pass muster among current cohorts of urban and rural experts with their deep commitments to discovering the elusive differences, although it may prove more acceptable to those schooled in the English town and country planning movement. I confess to being a life-long “townie” (with the exception of one brief, seven-year, hiatus in suburbia). I learned social stratification in the form of the differences between “town kids” and “country kids” long before I had any idea of other more basic differences of race, gender, class and religion. I also learned something of pathways to overcoming such differences.

There is little to be done about such differences in the short run. Large portions of those of us living in rural areas will go on believing that life there is, in some important if unspecified, ways different from – and superior to – life in “the big city” just as many urban dwellers will continue to believe just the opposite. Moreover, the case for establishing such differences through research remains weak.

## “Areas”

Let’s begin with the previously mentioned phrase urban and rural areas. Since we have been generally unsuccessful in distinguishing the two categories of urban and rural, let us look for a moment at the common term, areas. It seems clear that both types are intended to characterize a particular kind of social area: a territory, a region, or a place with a definite population. There isn’t to my knowledge a single analysis in the rural research literature of an empty place, or an area with no population. Those are not rural areas. They are wildernesses.

When we look closely at the actual composition of areas that are characterized as rural or urban areas, we can see that one of the things that separates them is the intensity of the built environments: Urban areas have much greater concentrations of buildings. Meanwhile, those characterized as rural generally feature greater mixtures of built environments (whether farm or ranch buildings, peasant cottages or some other structures) and natural areas, meaning simply in this case spaces where human planning and intervention have not been predominant: whether woods, pastures, grasslands or some other natural configuration. Simply running a pipeline through the Alaskan tundra may interrupt the complete wilderness of the area and even disrupt the local ecology, but it does not transform the tundra into a city.

## Town Theory

What is missing from the conventional urban-rural dichotomy as it is currently understood is any sense of the distinctive role of towns in the social ecology of rural regions. Even a quick glance at any road map will reveal what the dichotomy conceals: There are towns – both large and small – scattered across the length and breadth of rural America. Regardless of size, towns tend to serve a similar role and function to the rural areas in which they are found. Most notable for our purposes is their role as service centers.

According to Susan Reynolds (1977) a town is "a permanent human settlement in which a significant proportion of its population lives off trade, industry, administration and other non-agricultural occupations. It forms a social unit more or less distinct from the surrounding countryside." Clark and Ambrosia (1991) note that additional defining criteria used by historians to describe European towns, such as legal status, complex administration, apply mainly after the twelfth century.

One of the confusing aspects of the concept of towns is finding a proper place for it in the range of other settlement terms. In particular, the terms town, city and village can be difficult to separate, and are often mixed with other official settlement terms such as borough or municipality. This is especially true because most communities, including currently large cities in the United States, like New York, Boston and Chicago, began as villages or towns. (This is true everywhere in the US. except the Hispanic Southwest, where cities like Los Angeles, San Diego, Sante Fe and San Antonio were founded as cities in conformity with to the planning principles of the Spanish Laws of the Indies.)

The task of separating village, town and city is not as daunting as it may at first appear. Towns are generally intermediate settlements between villages and larger, more complex, cities. Max Weber and others have suggested that the existence of markets may be the most fundamental expression of this hierarchical integration, which also tends to display a physical patterning through various historically important trade routes – along rivers, railroads and highways, for example. Many towns are also differentiated from villages as “seats” or locations for particular institutions, establishments and formal organizations. There are, for example, more than 3,000 county governmental units in the U.S., and each one has a county seat – a city or town with a high concentration of county offices and services. Other seats are as diverse as cathedral towns, college towns and the locations of such traditional institutions as orphanages and children’s homes, sanitoria and state hospitals and other regionally important service centers.

As a result of this positioning, towns are, by definition, not autonomous communities, but integrated into hierarchies of settlement. We might, as a result, use the term village for smaller, more rural communities, particularly those where the majority of the population are related in a small number of kinship networks and involved directly in primary occupations (not only agriculture, as suggested by

Reynolds, but also other primary industries such as mining and fishing). From the above, one might also include among villages semi-permanent settlements (including Amerindian and military camps and modern campgrounds.) Likewise, the term city is most applicable to the largest, most urban communities, characterized by complex divisions of labor and broad stratification systems involving multiple statuses and power positions. An important characteristic of cities also is a greater degree of distinction from its surrounding countryside.

In between, manifesting both rural and urban tendencies is the town. Many things can be said about towns. They are a unique and distinctive settlement pattern, much studied in Britain where the Town and Country Planning Association has been functioning for decades. In the U.S., however, we have tended to largely ignore towns, lumping them generally into either rural or urban clumps on an ad hoc basis. Two points are of utmost importance for the further development of research and teaching on social work in rural areas:

- 1) The vast majority of human services organizations serving rural populations are actually based in towns. Rural-oriented social services are generally not found in cities, villages or as townies everywhere say "out in the country".
- 2) The fundamental physical or geographical boundary for the service population of a rural agency is not the neighborhood, as in the city, but the region surrounding the town where the service is located.

Nowhere is the need for this rethinking greater than in West Virginia and Appalachia. Appalachia as a social entity is commonly defined as a rural region, for example, even while the census region includes a number of larger and smaller SMSA's as Pittsburgh, Charleston and Huntington WV, Asheville NC, the "tri-cities" of Bristol-Kingsport and Johnson City and Knoxville TN. Central to the ARC planning strategy (and initially very controversial) is a concept of "development centers" very like that outlined in this paper. West Virginia is considered a "rural state" in this rural region. In the 1990 census, West Virginia shows 63.6% of its population in non-metropolitan areas, making it the eighth most rural state behind Idaho (79.6%), Montana (76.1%), Wyoming (70.4%), South Dakota (70%), Mississippi (69.9%), Vermont (76.6%) and Maine (64.1%).

The "myth of Appalachia" would suggest that the predominantly rural status of West Virginia means that the majority of the population of the state are remote rural residents living in hollows (or "hollars"), coal camps and cabins in the woods. Make no mistake about it: Such places and such folks do exist, but they are not nearly as numerous as one might suspect. They are not, in particular, anything approaching a defining majority in this most Appalachian of states.

West Virginia is a textbook case of modern rural/urban phenomena: Because West Virginia has 55 counties, the state can be divided very easily into quintiles of 11 counties each, forming a kind of Likert-scale from "most urban" (or "least rural") to "least urban" (and "most rural"). Moreover, in the majority of West Virginia counties, the single largest community forms a kind of natural focal point for the

county. This is as true of as it is of the smallest counties (with a county population of 8,200 like Doddridge where the county seat of West Union has a population 825) and mid-sized counties like Preston (population 33,500, where Kingwood is the county seat with a population 2,900) as it is of the largest (Kanawha County, population, 193,000 where Charleston – population 47,000 – is the urban core).

Each of the largest quintile of counties in West Virginia also includes one of the 11 largest municipalities of Charleston, Huntington, Parkersburg, Beckley, Morgantown, Clarksburg, Bluefield, Fairmont, Martinsburg and Wheeling. Together, this quintile contain 47.2% of the population. The two largest quintiles (22 counties) contain 70.7% of the state's population. Meanwhile, the smallest quintile of 11 counties contains less than 5% of the state's population and the bottom two quintiles contain 14% of the population (with one of the 22 counties exceeding 1 % of the total.)

The majority of West Virginians, like most residents of rural (non-metropolitan) America may think of themselves as “rural” but in reality they are primarily town dwellers. There are no large cities in the state (or, for that matter, in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, Mississippi, Vermont or Maine either). What there are mostly in all of these and several more states are small and large towns where the majority of the residents of rural America today actually reside and where all but an infinitesimal percentage of human and other services are located.

## Conclusion

One of the most fundamental insights of rural social work theory and practice should be the universal awareness that virtually no human services serving rural populations are located in either large cities or in the rural countryside. Rural human services are almost always located in small towns and small cities. The town is a unique and distinctive rural social, economic and political institution and key to understanding the organization of rural human services. Rural social work services delivered from social agencies located in towns also have a distinctly regional character and contemporary towns are increasingly integrated into regional service networks.

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