CHAPTER 3 — Educating Social Work Practitioners for the North: A Challenge for Conventional Models and Structures

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Social work education over the past two decades has tended to emphasize a generalist practice model focused on the interaction between person and environment. For the most part, textbooks and other teaching resources from this period illustrate an effort to unify the profession by developing a common base of knowledge, values and skills. Words such as "generic" and "holistic" are used to imply universal application. A recent challenge to this generalist approach has been issued by those who argue that social work has been preoccupied with common ground and unity to the detriment of practice theory related to human diversity (Davis & Proctor, 1989; Devore & Schlesinger, 1987; Dieppa, 1984; Green, 1982; Lum, 1986). Many practice texts of the 1980s did include material on culture, ethnicity, race, gender, age, class, and other human variables, yet even this effort reflects an emphasis on only one component of our declared dual focus on persons and their environments. Certainly we must incorporate implications of human diversity into our practice models, but what of environmental diversity?

For a long time our profession has been satisfied with a simplistic distinction between practice in urban and rural areas. This urban/rural dichotomy needs to be challenged and expanded. There have been rumblings in the literature suggesting a new categorization of "remote" practice, pushing beyond the simple urban/rural dichotomy to recognize that isolated regions are unique practice settings where conventional rural social work models may be inappropriate if not damaging. This paper will argue that conventional rural social work theory cannot move far enough from the urban base of the profession to generate useful practice models for remote regions such as northern Canada. Following an overview of the concepts of rurality and rural social work from the literature, evidence is offered to show that northern Canada is not just another rural area. Finally, implications for social work education and preparation for practice in remote northern regions are discussed.

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Rurality

As a general rule, the major models of professional social work practice have been developed and taught in urban centres. Most students training to become professional social workers learn these models in urban university or college settings, reinforced by field placements in urban agencies. It is true that many social science disciplines have developed a specialization for consideration of issues outside of urban areas (for example: rural sociology, rural psychology, rural social work), yet most of this rural theory comes from the United States. The rural specializations therefore tend to rely upon an American (excluding Alaska) view of rurality.

There is a general agreement in the literature that the adjective "rural" is confusing, imprecise, and lacks any universally accepted definition (Farley, Griffiths, Skidmore, & Thackery, 1982; Johnson, 1980; Southern Regional Education Board, 1976). For the purposes of legislation and policy, rural population limits can be found ranging from 2,500 to 50,000 persons. There appears to be some agreement in the literature from social work and geography that a threshold population of 10,000 persons is realistic for defining a rural settlement (Farley et al., 1982; Hodge & Qadeer, 1983). In addition to this population factor, most definitions of rurality incorporate elements of the environment and human interaction. The social work literature generally considers rural communities to be small settlements (less than 10,000 population) with an economy based on a primary production (usually agriculture) and special service needs related to distance and the small population.

Rural Social Work

During and after the First World War, the American Red Cross provided casework services in rural areas. Within the context of the economic depression and dustbowl conditions of the 1930s rural social work in the United States became well established and began to develop its own literature (for example: numerous articles on rural social welfare published in the journal *Rural Sociology*, and Josephine Brown's 1933 book *The Rural Community and Social Casework*).

Following the 1930s, rural social work was virtually ignored for three decades. References in the literature declined and all but disappeared (Ginsberg 1976, 1977, Nooe & Bolitho, 1982; Mermelstein & Sundet, 1977). This pattern reflected the general post-war

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trend to urbanization plus specific new developments in the overall profession of social work as it moved towards clinical practice and away from issues of poverty and social injustice. The addition, at this time, of analytic psychology and a medical model to the knowledge base of the profession contributed to the emphasis on urban situations. Training for social work became centred in urban graduate schools reinforcing urban theories with urban field experiences.

The next significant development in rural social work appears to have been an address to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in 1969 wherein Leon Ginsberg identified the ongoing neglect of rural communities as a subject for education and research in social work. Two years later, the Sixteenth Edition of the Encyclopedia of Social Work included its first feature on rural social work, also written by Ginsberg (1971). The 1970s witnessed rapid and major developments in this rural specialization, including: A CSWE Task Force on Rural Practice (Levin, 1974); establishment of the annual National Institute on Social Work in Rural Areas; formation of both the American Rural Social Work Caucus and the Canadian Rural Social Work Forum. Launching of the journal *Human Services in the Rural Environment* and publication of collected papers from the new conferences (Ginsberg, 1976; Green & Webster, 1977) meant that a literature was developing specific to rural practice concerns. By the end of the 1970s, it was apparent that "rural social work had succeeded in gaining a place in the ranks of the profession" (Martinez-Brawley, 1981, p.201).

Most of the rural practice readings and articles produced during the 1970s have been characterized as subjective, descriptive and anecdotal rather than empirical (Albers & Thompson, 1980; Farley et al., 1982; Nooe & Bolitho, 1982). Rural social workers generally are depicted as practising under conditions of high visibility with few professional supports. Employed by public multi-purpose agencies, they provide informal and personalized service. The main thrust of this rural practice literature could be described as modification and adaption of urban programs and services for non-urban areas, how to overcome geographic obstacles and community resistance to ensure that rural people have access to the same services available in the city. This approach, in effect, views rural people as disadvantaged urbanites. Similar goals and aspirations are assumed; only practice techniques and service delivery strategies require adaption. From this perspective, rural social work can be described as a *specialty* within the urban-based social work profession.

During the 1980s, the knowledge base and literature on rural social work continued to grow. The National Institute has been held

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annually, proceedings have been published, and the journal *Human Services in the Rural Environment* has continued publication (overcoming a major disruption and relocation due to funding cuts). More important to this discussion, however, were several Canadian authors making a distinction between social work in rural agriculture settings and practice in remote northern communities (Collier, 1984; McKay, 1987; Zapf, 1985, 1985b, 1989). Having grappled with this same issue, the European Centre for Social Welfare Training and Research proposed a new category of "remote" or "isolated" practice setting, calling attention

> to a nuanced perception of the rural world, remote or isolated rural areas being clearly opposed, from the spatial and qualitative points of view, to semi-rural areas and peri-rural areas. (Maclouf & Lion, 1984, p.8)

The European Centre identified northern Canada and northern Scandinavia as remote or isolated regions (Ribes, 1985).

What are the features of these remote and isolated settings that suggest they do not fit easily within the American notion of rurality presented in the literature? This question will be addressed by application of the conventional characteristics of rurality to the Canadian North.

The Canadian North

Attempting to apply the rural characteristic of low population density to northern Canada leaves one in awe of the immensity of the region. Canada can be described as an enormous hinterland resting above a narrow southern ribbon of population. It has been estimated that nine out of ten Canadians live within 200 miles of the American border; six out of ten in the narrow urban corridor between Quebec City and Windsor (Beaujot & McQuillan, 1982). In contrast, Canada's North has been depicted as "the presence of only about 250 small communities scattered across a territory as large as Europe" (Hamelin, 1978, p.68), reflecting the reality that 1% of the population occupies the northern 80% of the land mass. Environmental psychologists have observed that most of Canada can be characterized as "wilderness" yet less than 2% of the United States (outside Alaska) is wilderness and the term has virtually no application in modern Europe (Stringer, 1975, p.302). Surely this vast wilderness area stretches the American rural characteristic of low population density beyond relevance.

As an illustration of this stretch, consider the opening ceremonies of the 1984 National Institute on Social Work in Rural Areas, where

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the host state of Maine was described as a rural state. This prompted a presenter from northern Canada to make a quick trip to the encyclopedia where he discovered that Maine was in fact 300 times more densely populated than his home jurisdiction of the Yukon Territory! Consulting next the urban-rural continuum in the American text *Rural Social Work Practice* (Farley et al, 1982), the presenter saw that most Yukon communities could not even be placed at the extreme pole of "absolute rural" without multiplying the distances given by the authors by a factor of at least five. Clearly the population and distance features of this remote region in northern Canada could not be captured by the conventional American rural yardstick (Zapf, 1985b).

The American rural practice literature also observes that advances in transportation have reduced the isolation in modern rural communities allowing many rural residents to maintain relationships and even employment outside of their home community, and keep up with the developments in metropolitan areas (Melton, 1983; Schneider, 1978; Weber, 1976). This pattern does not generalize easily to the Canadian North where transportation routes are oriented vertically, reflecting links of dependency on southern Canada. There are very few east-west networks connecting communities across the North. Rather than developing a central core of their own, northern regions tend to interact with the nearest urban centre to the south. The transport links that do exist are not readily accessible to northern residents because of the prohibitive cost resulting from vast distance and high fuel costs. As well as the cost, reliability of transportation in the North can be an issue where climate conditions frequently make surface travel dangerous and interrupt already irregular air schedules.

At first glance, the economy of the Canadian North appears similar to rural American regions in that primary production activities predominate and local economies lack depth. There is one striking feature of the northern economy, however, that sets it apart from the rural American situation: subsistence hunting and gathering activities co-exist with the market-oriented industrial society. Over time, the subsistence economy has developed complex ties of dependence with the industrial economy; northerners who choose to "live in the bush" for periods of time are influenced by economic, social, and political decisions made in populated centres. On the local level, this pattern of dependence parallels the overall imbalance between northern and southern Canada.

The relationship between southern Canada and the North has been presented in the literature using a "heartland-hinterland"

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analysis (Collier, 1984; McCann, 1987; Usher, 1987; Westfall, 1980). Power, control, and the ability to innovate are located in the heartland or core urban regions in southern Canada. The northern hinterland is dependent upon the southern heartland for investment capital, technical expertise, markets, information, and general well-being. Ongoing underdevelopment in the northern hinterland is not accidental, rather it is a purposeful relationship designed to transfer value from the hinterland to the urban areas of the South (Collier, 1984). Development has been imposed upon the region in powerful episodic waves related to the needs of the South (gold rush, military requirements, mineral and oil extraction, recreation, pulp mills) not the needs of the North. This hinterland dependency is perhaps most obvious now in the Yukon and Northwest Territories which still have colonial status legally where their "resources are owned, and policies for their development devised, by the federal government in trust for all Canadians" (Usher, 1987, p.483-484). Northern portions of all provinces except the Maritimes are similarly dependent upon urbanized provincial capitals to the south. The nature of this exploitive relationship of dependence has prompted several authors to refer to areas of northern Canada as a domestic Third World (Carniol, 1987; Collier, 1984; Jull, 1986; Usher, 1987; Weller, 1984; Zapf, 1985, 1989).

When the social work literature discusses social development in Third World settings, a common starting point is an examination of the world view and values underlying any offer of service. Traditional world views in northern Canada have emphasized harmony with the environment expressed through values that involve stewardship, sharing, cooperation, and coexistence, a perspective which is in obvious conflict with the assumptions of individual autonomy, environmental ownership, and manipulation for profit evident in the industrial south (Collier, 1984; Jull, 1985; Moore & Vanderhaden, 1984, 1984; Singer, 1980).

Social Work in the North

The economic history of Canada's North reveals deliberate exploitive manipulation of the region as a hinterland, but what about the history of specialized helping functions, such as social work, reaching out from the heartland?

In retrospect, it is evident that government programmes were implemented according to metropolitan perceptions. Northern needs in health, education, shelter, and welfare were identified by the government

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and responded to by the government. Though intentions were human-
itarian, programmes often proceeded in ignorance of how the Native
people lived and therefore often did not solve fundamental prob-
lems. (Usher, 1987, p.503)

It is not that social workers or policy and program planners set out
deliberately to destroy the lives of northern Canadians, yet such
strong urban bias is "more than simply mistaken, but less than
dishonest" (Lipton, 1977, p.63). These people simply viewed the
North in southern terms and assumed urban programs and models
would be imposed for the good of the people there. Their application
to northern regions of concepts developed within the ideology of
southern Canada led to a view of the North as a variation of the
South explained in terms relevant only to the South. When the North
is considered as a variation of the South, then northern peoples are
perceived as disadvantaged southerners with certain problems
requiring intervention from specialized southern services if they are
ever to catch up with the mainstream (Castellano, 1971; Lotz, 1977;
Zapf, 1987).

Arguing that the most liberal and benevolent intentions from a
privileged urban society only result in decreased control in the
hinterland, Paine (1977) labelled this approach "welfare colonial-
ism" (p.3). Abramson (1985) similarly distinguished between the
benevolent intent of a dominant helper and the effect of violation on
the person coerced, applying the label "paternalism" (p.389). Cas-
tellano (1971) used even stronger language describing such help as

predicted on a destructive kind of contract, which assumes that the giver
is strong, wise, and generous, and the receiver is, by definition, weak,
ignorant, and grateful. An offer of help on these terms is not help at all,
but rather a violence perpetuated against the person allegedly
helped. (p.352)

Although accounts of northern practice in the literature have tended
to be descriptive and anecdotal, one observation is reported consis-
tently: a high rate of staff turnover. Speculation on the factors
associated with this turnover points to an uneasy fit between urban-
based practice models and the realities of northern communities.
This poor fit manifests itself in the field as a stressful choice perceived
by the worker as he or she comes to view the approach of the
profession as incompatible with active membership in the commu-
nity. Consider these descriptions from the published accounts of
northern practice:

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the work is normally governed by province-wide social policies which do not 'fit' with the needs of northern peoples ... the practitioner frequently represents an organization or system which denies people access to needed services and resources (McKay, 1987, p.266-268);

caught between opposing forces, workers had to choose between following their consciences and ensuring a continuance of their pay-cheque (Lotz, 1982, p.28);

workers could not resolve the conflict between their ideals ... and the realities of a colonial bureaucratic system that did not support them in the way the situation warranted (Koster, 1977, p.158);

the role conflict forced workers to make a choice between their community and their profession (Zapf, 1985, p.188);

the world view of the agency may be utterly opposed to that of the community. The agency may, in fact, be actively assisting to destroy that world. But that is the job (Collier, 1984, p.69);

[I] was being forced to make a choice to enforce a social assistance regulation which was implemented without regard to the particular culture in which I work or to choose what is my moral responsibility and follow the ethics of the social work profession to which I aspire (P. Brown cited in Lundy & Gauthier, 1989, p.191).

These accounts indicate a conflict between the world views (ideologies) of the southern urban based profession and the northern hinterland communities. Not merely an abstract intellectual challenge, this conflict is experienced intensely at the level of daily life in the northern community. Once a social worker actually moves to a remote northern community, support for the southern ideology weakens as new local expectations emerge. In a recent study of Yukon social workers recruited from southern Canada, Zapf (1989) found a culture shock pattern similar to that anticipated when workers go overseas. This evidence supports the argument that social workers moving from southern Canada to practice in the North do encounter a very different world view and system of meanings.

Implications for Social Work Education

If one accepts that northern Canada is not simply another "rural" area but is one example of the new category of "remote" practice setting suggested in the literature, then obvious challenges arise for social work education. How well do existing education structures and content prepare students for practice in such remote environments? Are existing programs in a position to develop and incorporate an appropriate theory base for remote practice? The last decade

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has seen the development of innovative social work education programs scattered across the North as well as increased focus on northern practice issues at some southern schools. While most of these endeavours are at a relatively early stage of development, it is possible to put forward reasonable (though as yet untested) suggestions for social work education. This discussion is indicative rather than authoritative or exhaustive, highlighting key observations and issues from the literature as likely starting points for the improvement of training for practice in northern Canada.

Research: There are no universities with graduate social work programs in northern Canada at this time, which means that there is no local northern base for faculty and graduate students conducting research. Social research in the North can be expensive and time-consuming. MSW and doctoral students soon learn that they will graduate more quickly with much less expense if they select thesis topics where the data is located near their urban school in the South. Only those graduate students with a strong commitment to the North are likely to select and pursue northern social research issues. Few northerners seek graduate education in the South because of the overwhelming costs (financial, social, spiritual) of such a move. It follows then that northern social welfare issues tend to be defined in urban school settings and framed in southern terms. The North is only an occasional setting for data collection, a kind of "northern laboratory" (Cruikshank, 1984). Northern social workers and their clients have seldom been involved from the very beginning in the definition and selection of relevant problems for study.

Background Preparation: Undergraduate social work education programs vary widely in the degree to which specific prerequisite courses are required for admission. An overall observation would be that a general arts base seems to be the preferred foundation for approaching the study of social work. Favoured courses traditionally have been the social sciences of psychology and sociology, including some introduction to research methods. Students preparing for northern practice, however, should also consider such disciplines as economics, geography, political science, environmental studies, anthropology, and history to become familiar with the concepts required to perceive issues facing northern communities and northern residents.

Special attention must be paid to history because for many students and instructors of this generation there will be a crucial process of "unlearning" first. Many of us learned in public school about the Europeans' "discovery" of North America, about brave

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explorers surviving on their own ingenuity in a harsh and empty land, about Indian "massacres", about dedicated missionaries saving heathen souls, about determined settlers carving a new life out of the wilderness. These events need to be reconsidered from the perspective of exploitation, underdevelopment, and colonialism. The underlying ideologies of racism, sexism, and capitalism may have been rendered invisible in our early schooling.

Teaching Resources: Another major implication for social work education is a plea to acknowledge and question the urban American origin of most of the course content, textbooks, and teaching resources currently in use. This problem is not unique to Canada. Rosenman (1980) depicted the American influence on social work education in Australia as resulting in irrelevant frameworks for analysis leading to an upper middle class profession of problem-focused specialists who have become non-political. She argued that teaching of relevant context-based models must involve an understanding of the environment in terms of local politics and structures, plus the production of local resources—general texts, theory, and research—to combat the domination of the imported American material. It may require less effort and expense to buy the packaged American material promoted as generic and universal in application, but the danger is that social work graduates anywhere in the world will be working on American problems with American strategies, without regard for local values and priorities.

Among those innovative social work education programs that have developed in pockets across northern Canada, there appears to be a desperate need for just this kind of relevant northern resource material for the classroom (Ballard-Kent & Cromwell, 1985). Available texts, originating in urban university settings, tend to reflect a foreign (non-northern if not non-Canadian) world view and priorities. Many northern instructors have to use conventional rural social work texts plus Collier's (1984) book supplemented by reading packages consisting of old workshop handouts, dog-eared copies of past conference papers, and a few published articles on northern practice collected from scattered journals and newsletters. There is no directory or compilation of northern case studies for illustration, class discussion, and examination purposes. Each instructor develops his or her own private "treasure" of northern case material, a task which can be very difficult, time-consuming and isolating.

There appears to be a great need at this time for linkages to be established between social work education programs across the North. Sharing and consolidation of proven northern case material

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for classroom use could result in a resource directory of great value to isolated northern instructors.

Transition Stress: If the curriculum of social work schools included issues of heartland-hinterland relations, underdevelopment, and the potential for social work to be perceived as an agent of benevolent oppression, then workers recruited for remote northern communities might have more realistic expectations of their role and the inherent conflicts. There is evidence in the literature that the stress experienced by new workers is directly related to this discrepancy between job expectations and fulfilment in the new setting (Berry, 1985; Feather, 1982; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Schools of social work might also consider specific course content on transition stress and adjustment experiences. Graduates of southern schools who accept what appears to be a familiar job in an unfamiliar remote northern setting may encounter the transition stress of culture shock. The literature suggests that prior understanding of that phenomenon may itself promote adjustment (Barna, 1983; Kealey, 1978). A recent study of social workers recruited for remote northern communities found that realistic expectations and clear understanding of the role workers are hired to perform may reduce the transition stress experienced; recovery from this stress was related to the worker's appreciation that culture shock is natural, unavoidable, and time limited (Zapf, 1989).

Worker Roles: Since local control and community empowerment have emerged as key issues in most northern regions across Canada, northern social workers will be expected to use collaborative approaches working *with* communities rather than simply working *in* communities. Wharf (1979) warned that such partnership between worker and community would be a "quantum leap" for middle-class social workers steeped in the assumptions of the larger society (p.271). In a later work, Wharf (1985) identified one prerequisite for a partnership strategy as "the willingness of professional staff to risk and to share responsibility with members of the community, and to expand their job definitions into new and uncharted territory" (p.15). However, as pointed out by Ritchie (1982), it may first be necessary to amend civil service procedures before direct responsibility to the client can be recognized and permitted by the employer. Workers training for northern practice need to be aware of the serious implications of this issue.

A powerful example comes from Sheshashit, Labrador, where local social service workers and the district manager were suspended because "they refused to implement a social assistance policy that

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they considered to be culturally inappropriate" (Lundy & Gauthier, 1989, p.190). Court action and union procedures were not successful in returning the workers to their jobs. The Newfoundland Association of Social Workers firmly supported the suspended workers and confirmed that they had acted in accordance with their profession's Code of Ethics, but the Association had no mandate to intervene. The message from this case appears to be that workers who refuse to administer policy perceived as harmful to clients could find themselves unemployed and replaced in the northern community. There can be very practical limitations on the extent to which the social worker is able to move into the uncharted territory of declaring partnership with the community. At the risk of mixing metaphors, educators have a responsibility to caution northern social workers to look before they quantum leap!

Practice Models: The issues arising in remote practice settings present a challenge to the generalist practice model itself. As outlined clearly by Germain & Gitterman (1980) a decade ago, a practice model consists of four components:

1. *Metaphor*, the starting point, a paradigm or world view, an outlook applied to the world to give meaning to events;

2. *Social Purpose*, the way the world should be, the goal, desired or preferred circumstances following from the metaphor;

3. *Conceptual Framework*, a way of thinking, concepts for assessing everyday situations consistent with the metaphor;

4. *Practice Method*, actually doing something, acting upon the world to accomplish the social purpose.

Generalist practice is rooted in a metaphor of ecology, "an adaptive, evolutionary view of human beings in constant interchange with all aspects of their environment" (Germain & Gitterman, 1980, p.5). Following from this metaphor, the desired state involves a goodness-of-fit between people and environments where both prosper. When the generalist model has been transplanted to a remote practice setting such as northern Canada, the metaphor and social purpose have often remained virtually intact. Southern Canadians have determined what is in the best interests of northerners and then structured program delivery to overcome obstacles and resistance. Major modifications might be made at the level of conceptual framework or practice method, but the world view and social purpose are seldom determined by northerners themselves. Even the specialization of rural social work may not move far enough from the

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urban base of the profession to tackle the issues of empowerment in remote communities.

Thomas Berger (1988) captured in a phrase the essence of the conflicting metaphors between remote northern Canada and the rest of the country. He spoke of "two distinct views of the North: one as frontier, the other as homeland" (p.31). To the people of southern Canada (rural or urban), the North is a vast frontier of resources to be developed for the benefit of all. To the people of the North, the region is a homeland to be honoured and cared for. From a social work perspective, a similar distinction has been made between those who live in a remote community as "home" and those outsiders who perceive it as a "target group" to be planned for and served by professional agents (Zapf, 1985b).

Commentaries on practice in northern Canada have called for alternatives to the ecological metaphor and notion of fit. Hudson and McKenzie (1985) supported a conflict model as the appropriate metaphor underlying practice with northern Native peoples, arguing that the "fit" implied in a consensus model is not appropriate where there are groups with different values and an unequal power base. Recognizing that the form of helping as well as the problem definition must come from within the context of the community, Nelson (1986) called for a context-focused approach to replace a universal problem-solving method for northern practitioners. McKay (1987) acknowledged that ecosystems theory can be a helpful guide for practitioners but "a second theoretical perspective, however, seems necessary to assist in the recognition of conflicting values and positions within human ecosystems" (p.275). Arguing that a "fit" for one group may involve considerable cost for another, McKay also advocated a conflict perspective as the necessary adjunct to ecosystems theory for practice in northern Canada.

Development of a full new model of northern practice is well beyond the scope of this article and the limited knowledge base available at this time. That task remains ahead of us, but this discussion does suggest that we will have to start with metaphors or world views that have meaning in the North. The beginning literature points to a heartland-hinterland theory, conflict theory, and the notion of underdevelopment as useful complements to the developing ecological model as we approach the theory-building task.

Conclusion

During the past 20 years, a developing literature on rural social work has addressed issues of design and delivery of social services outside

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of urban areas. This rural social work theory, however, cannot move far enough from the urban base of the profession to generate useful practice models for remote regions such as northern Canada. Conventional rural social work leads to a pathology-oriented view of northern peoples as disadvantaged and in need of special interventions determined in southern urban power centres. Social work students preparing to work in remote northern communities must be encouraged to challenge the ecological metaphor underlying generalist rural practice, with its attendant notion of "goodness-of-fit." Generalist practice models may actually mask the reality of inequality whereby dominant groups in the urban South have the power to define the adaptive fit required of northern minorities. There is recent evidence in the literature of beginning attempts to extend the traditional urban-rural continuum to include remote practice. A crucial task facing social work practitioners and educators in the 1990s will be development of a relevant knowledge base and appropriate practice models in this neglected setting.

As a final note, it is important to point out that remote settings in the Canadian North are not the only areas where the generalist notion of goodness-of-fit is being challenged. From a feminist perspective, Gould (1987) offered a similar critique that goodness-of-fit is too neutral to account for the reality that some groups have the power to define the nature of that fit for others. Lowe (1988) similarly argued that person-environment fit has been dangerously distorted in a setting such as South Africa where social work becomes a "functional adjunct" (p.32) to the dominant power group. The literature from southern Canada also includes cautions that the model must be adapted to pay more attention to issues of economics, politics, and social justice (Carniol, 1987; Lightman, 1985; Turner, 1987; Yelaja, 1985). There will be many other instances in our society of dominant groups with the power to define problems, plan strategy, and deliver services for minority groups. These unequal power relationships, and the metaphors that maintain them, must be identified and challenged by our profession. Perhaps it is in remote regions such as the North that we see most clearly the destructive effects of benevolent oppression, of imposed world views.

> In the northern environment, we find, reduced to their essence, many of the questions that have arisen through our history: the rights of small, peripheral communities to survival, autonomy and self-preservation versus the rights and claims of the majority community; ecological versus economic growth; individual versus community rights. Working out answers to these and other questions in the context of northern development represents a challenge both for Northerners themselves, and for all

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other Canadians. The answers we give will not only determine the future of the territories, but they will also tell us something important about the values we all hold as the Canadian people.

(Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, 1985, preface)

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Commentary on CHAPTER 3

JOHN COSSOM

I will respond to Kim Zapf's article from the perspective of one who for the last seventeen years has taught social work practice in two schools of social work (Regina and Victoria) which have had a mission of preparing practitioners for work in rural regions of Canada.

I find Zapf's article a very useful one, written as it is by someone who has both practised in the Yukon, and whose research has been focused on practice in remote areas. Much of what he says strikes a responsive chord. In social work education's search for a niche and an identity for non-urban practice, it has tended to over-simplify the concept of "rural", and has sometimes created an unhelpful polarity of rural-urban practice. While there are legitimate special features of rural practice, there are also many aspects that are generic to all kinds of social work, be that practice in Vancouver or Carcross. It's also important to remember that the wide variety of rural contexts in Canada defy undue generalisation—communities have as many discrete features as they do characteristics in common.

As Zapf suggests, social work education for rural practice may all too often have operated on the unwitting assumption that the responsibility of practitioners is to bring to rural "disadvantaged" Canada the advantages of modern urban civilisation. Another difficulty, typical of Canadian academe, has been social work's dependence on United States literature which has further compounded difficulties in addressing Canada's own unique regional and rural realities.

But despite these developmental obstacles, and given the Canadian demographic profile, we should be pleasantly surprised and modestly satisfied with the extent of interest in and commitment to non-urban social work that has emerged at a number of university centres. Zapf's article challenges us to move on and further distinguish between rural and remote practice, and to identify the skills, knowledge and theories needed to prepare social workers for a useful role in Canada's North.

It is true that generalist practice models have dominated undergraduate social work education for the past two decades. Zapf notes that an ecological perspective has been the dominant paradigm for

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these models of practice, building upon a social work adoption of systems theories. The attraction of this ecological-systems orientation has been its promise and potential to link individual troubles to social issues—always a concern of social work; to allow social workers to think freely about levels and types of interventions from individual helping to community change; and to free practitioners of methodological and specialist straightjackets.

Now social work is becoming more attuned to some of the inherent drawbacks of a systems-ecological perspective. For example, it stresses the connections and importance of a good fit between people and environments, yet does not really point to powerful social, political and economic forces that often fracture this fit. Too often, an ecological analysis seems to lead toward helping people adjust to an inhospitable environment that is not responsive to their needs and concerns; and where the fit benefits the powerful at the expense of the powerless. This seems to be a particularly relevant critique of practice for social workers in remote areas of Canada, where legislation, policies and, indeed, even a constitution is designed to serve the seats of southern power at the expense of northern territories, communities, families and individuals. There seems to be little doubt that additional theoretical perspectives are needed to inform generalist practice models so that practitioners are knowledgeable about themes such as structural inequality, power imbalances, contemporary as well as historical colonial relationships and their resulting dependencies.

But an important distinction needs to be made here, in my opinion. The deficiencies of ecological theory are not inherent in a generalist model of practice. Rather they stem from the reliance on theoretical frameworks that are used to inform generalist practice, or even more broadly on the metaphor that underlies the practice model. It is here that the shift needs to be undertaken in thinking about social work practice, to make it more appropriate and relevant for remote regions.

Generalist practice need not be tied to a single metaphor or theoretical foundation. Generalist practice can best be understood as an approach to social work which seeks "to embrace all the purposes of social work. It must seek to improve the lot of both the individual as it seeks to obtain social justice. ... The driving forces behind generalist practice are social work's purposes and values" (O'Neill). A generalist practitioner is called upon to have generic skills that permit her to work creatively with individuals, groups and communities in response to a range of human needs and concerns. Then the

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practitioner needs theories that inform practice. And, too, there are social work's values and ethics that frame practice.

The question of what knowledge and theory to use to *inform* generalist practice is a somewhat separate one. The challenge for social work, then, is to prepare students with theory for practice that can be used effectively in communities where power differentials, colonial relationships and culture clashes are crucial to understanding the problems faced by people—a challenge that is not limited to practice in remote settings. Social workers need new metaphors for work with a variety of populations—such as racial and ethnic minorities, disempowered women, developmentally handicapped people, indeed, any groups whose situations cannot be adequately understood in politically neutral ecological-systems terms.

There can be no single overarching theory to support generalist practice, just as no one theory guides the general medical practitioner. So it's important not to throw out the generalist practice model with the theoretical bath water! It seems to me, that a generalist rather than a specialist orientation is most useful for a northern practitioner because of the array of problems that are encountered in remote communities undergoing rapid social and cultural change, and the limited formal resources that exist for responding to them. Surely a generalist practitioner is much more likely to be of help to people in northern communities than a narrow specialist? Research done on the adequacy of a generalist practice model for work in rural communities shows that practitioners trained as generalists and their supervisors/employers overwhelmingly support this approach and strongly recommend its continuance in a social work curriculum (Cossom, 1989). Indeed, while a vast majority of practitioners and their employers strongly supported generalist practice as a preferred orientation, those working in rural regions did so even more affirmatively.

Besides the need for theoretical advances in support of a more relevant social work practice in remote regions, there are also some crucial practical questions that beg to be addressed. For example, how can practitioners be encouraged to work in remote regions? A quick review of the first 325 graduates of the University of Victoria school shows that only five or six found their way to the territories upon graduation, and this from a school that actively encourages practice in the North. My observation is that students who experience a practicum in a rural community sometimes alter their preconceived notions about where they would like to work after graduation and return to the town or region in which they had a positive

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experience. (The University of Victoria placed students in Yukon practicum placements until severe economic restraint intervened.) The obstacles to developing practica in remote regions of Canada are powerful ones both from educational and economic points of view, yet somehow this needs to be tackled.

The lack of educational opportunities for northern residents presents major obstacles that affect the recruitment of social workers who choose to stay in the North and who see it as home. Post-secondary educational opportunities in the North are scant, especially in professional areas. Some schools of social work have attempted to counter lack of success by decentralising their operations (e.g. University of Regina). Others have introduced other models of distance education such as the independent study route of the University of Victoria (Callahan and Wharf, 1989). But can distance education alone provide the answer for recruiting and developing social workers who have a better appreciation for the North and who are less likely to encounter the culture shock that Zapf has documented? While this approach may show considerable promise, it is not without drawbacks as an approach to professional education. Perhaps until there are northern post-secondary institutions available to provide education that is responsive to remote regions' needs, then the problems of practice identified by Zapf will continue unabated—high rates of turnover, burnout and frustration on the part of social workers who are ill-prepared for northern practice, and who find the gap between professional values and employer demands too wide to successfully bridge.

There is no shortage of ideas for strengthening the approaches to social work practice in remote communities in Canada. But the lag between the development of knowledge and its actual impact on practice is a notoriously long one, even in communities that have an abundance of universities and research centres in their midst. It is something of a luxury to be discussing the need for new theories and metaphors for practice when the fact of the matter is that there are few social workers in the North who have had the opportunity of education for practice, let alone a professional preparation that matches the realities that they face.

Yet both of these questions are worthy of attention and illustrate the challenge to social work. Practitioners must be able to think critically and creatively about the problems they are called upon to address, while at the same time be rooted in the realities of people whom they serve. Zapf's article speaks forthrightly about these realities in Canada's northland, and invites a more creative social work response.

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Commentary on CHAPTER 3

MAGEE MILLER

At first glance the comparison may seem obscure; however, there is a distinct similarity between sky diving and being a practitioner in the North. Having just completed my third winter as a northern practitioner and currently enrolled in the Yellowknife Sky Diving Club, I am acutely aware that both endeavours require specific preparation in order to be successful. Prospective sky divers undergo detailed instructions so as to ensure their safety and increase the likelihood of a worthwhile experience. Unfortunately many social workers do not have the luxury of such preparation. As one of the southern trained social workers who "crash landed" numerous times during my first year, I would strongly recommend the inclusion of northern studies in the social work curriculum.

In the following article Professor Zapf argues for a more relevant practice model than presently exists to adequately prepare social workers for northern practice. As a front line worker I have a natural suspicion of academics who theorize about practice from behind their desks. Coupled with this I have developed the northern cynicism regarding southern expertise. I was therefore impressed with the degree of sensitivity and accuracy with which Professor Zapf presents the North and northern practice in his article.

While I disagree with some of his assumptions regarding the generalist rural model, his article clearly articulates the fundamental issues which argue for a distinct northern practice model. In looking for an appropriate model in which to train northern practitioners, Professor Zapf discounts the generalist rural practice model. He seems to imply this model actually might hinder social work practice. I maintain that regardless of their theoretical background, no social worker could practice in the North and be blind to the domination of the North by southern influences, whether political or economic. It is in fact this awareness that enables practitioners to be far more sensitive to the impact of dependency in their lives and their clients' lives. It no longer is appropriate to portray the North as a land where dominant white southern trained social workers administer to submissive northern Native peoples. In the Territories, social work practitioners are accountable to and regulated by the local Territorial government. The Government is elected by northerners and reflects

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both the Native and non-Native population mix. As well, most northern communities have social services workers who are people hired from the community they serve. Although the two social work diploma programs are relatively new in the North, Dene and Inuit graduates are beginning to assume more responsibility within the Department of Social Services.

Professor Zapf's emphasis that "northern Canada is not just another rural area" is to my mind the key to understanding northern practice and the North itself. He presents a well-defended argument against classifying the Canadian North according to the American notion of rurality. I would agree that the environmental and human diversity of the North requires that it be placed in a distinct category. The assumption that the North can be classified according to southern terms of reference is indicative of the ignorance surrounding this region.

Prior to living in the Territories I also had little knowledge of the North. In 1987 I packed my bags and headed north, naively believing my years in Fort St. John and Queen Charlotte City had prepared me for rural social work. When I landed at Baker Lake, NWT, an Inuit community of 1,000 people, I quickly realized my understanding of the terms "rural" and "remote" was about to undergo considerable change. Suddenly, I was a minority surrounded by a foreign culture.

Professor Zapf realistically describes the dramatic shock which new practitioners face as they "encounter a very different world view and system of meanings." He argues that it is the lack of preparation which compounds cultural shock. I would agree that this transitional stress could be greatly reduced if practitioners were educated regarding the political, economic and cultural realities of the North. Professor Zapf's suggestion that practitioners be trained as if they were going to a foreign country—and in particular his reference to Third World countries—is insightful. It is an opinion held by many northerners that the North has more in common with the circumpolar and Third World nations than much of "rural" Canada.

In recounting such factors as "welfare colonialism" and the "hinterland-heartland" dichotomy, Professor Zapf accurately portrays the bleak history of the human service programs in the North. He also highlights some of the existing blocks to delivering such programs. For example, he implies that the high rate of staff turnover is due partly to the lack of "fit" between urban-designed programs and their utility in the North. Indeed, many programs in the North are southern imports. However, once established in the North they take on a life of their own. In the Territories our programs reflect the

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unique characteristics of this region. In order to survive, programs have to adapt to the needs of the people.

I would argue that it is not so much "goodness of fit" as it is a lack of quantity of programs, whether of southern or northern design, that creates burnout. The North has complex social problems which easily overwhelm the few practitioners working with even fewer resources. Professor Zapf has alluded to some of the more negative aspects of practising in the North, i.e., high visibility, few professional supports, geographic obstacles, climatic extremes, community resistance, and cultural diversities. If one considers these factors, plus the lack of services in the North, the high rate of staff turnover is not surprising. The North is an area that demands a great deal from anyone who chooses to live and work here. Not only is it professionally challenging to practice social work in the North, it is just as personally challenging to live here.

As Professor Zapf points out, "if one accepts that northern Canada is not simply another rural area ..." there are obvious challenges for social work education. I agree that in order to educate social workers for the North there must be a curriculum which realistically reflects both the history as well as the present-day situation. Professor Zapf stresses that such a curriculum must include political, economic, and cultural factors. Social workers are heavily impacted by the context in which they practice. Adequate preparations would ensure that their ability to function within the political, economic and cultural systems was increased.

This is not to say that practitioners cannot assimilate information while on the job. However, this style of learning can be at the expense of the practitioner. New social workers undergo extremely stressful transitional periods until they become familiar with the various factors that have an impact upon the North.

I know that it would have been helpful to me if prior to coming to the North my social work curriculum had included Northern Studies. Realizing the ramifications of such concerns as ecological versus economic growth and the heartland-hinterland conflict would have sensitized me to some current issues facing the North. So Professor Zapf and I agree that Canadian social workers need to be better educated regarding such an important region of their country. The North's uniqueness needs to be studied, understood, and appreciated by practitioners prior to arrival here. This would have a positive impact both on the practitioner and the practice.

However, I am not convinced that a distinct practice model needs to be created for northern practitioners. Having been trained as a

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rural generalist practitioner, I have found this model provided me with an adaptive, workable framework. But I appreciated Professor Zapf's arguments as he forced me to re-examine my practice in the North. Clearly, the social work curriculum needs to include northern studies in recognition of the North's unique character and its important place in Canada. I leave it up to the reader to decide whether there needs to be a distinct practice model or whether existing models would suffice.