

MANAGING TENSIONS IN PROFESSIONAL STATUTORY PRACTICE: ESSENTIAL RESEARCH FOR LIVING AND WORKING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the management of tensions in work-life balances for professionals not only having statutory responsibilities in health, education, human and police services, but also living in the rural and remote communities they serve. It engages with the literature on living and working in rural contexts and describes the impetus for current ARC Discovery research before putting forward suggestions for the kind of further research we feel is necessary if our understanding of living in rural and remote communities, particularly for professionals with statutory responsibilities is to be enhanced.

Specifically the paper highlights current research aiming to generate new knowledge about: how professionals and their local communities can forge productive links to enhance collaboration and service delivery; and factors contributing to professionals' training, recruitment and retention in such communities. When professionals have mandatory responsibilities (in child protection, law enforcement or mental health matters), tensions can arise between workers and the community in which they live. The study described in this paper emphasises the need to investigate the views of community members impacted by their work. The study aims offer solutions to the complex medical, legal and social issues that arise for different professional groups in the discharge of their duties. It will increase current knowledge about the nature of their roles and responsibilities in small communities, and about improving professional practice and retention, leading to improved service delivery and outcomes for individuals, families and communities. This 3-year project uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to map the terrain of rural and remote statutory work, to explore the nature of the relationships between professionals and communities and examine how professionals manage ethical and allegiance conflicts which arise.

Living and working in rural communities

Living and working in small communities poses challenges for many professional in the execution of their daily work-tasks. The juggling of multiple roles which straddle both their professional and personal worlds becomes an ongoing negotiated space of conflicting responsibilities and allegiances with increased potential for ethical dilemmas (Hargrove, 1986; Fertman, Dotson, Mazzocco & Reitz, 2005; McAuliffe, 2005a). When the nature of the work includes a statutory requirement, which carries some legal responsibilities such as mandatory reporting, policing or the regulation of mental health patients, the frequency and intensity of these dilemmas are likely to be increased. Highly publicised events such as the intervention in the Northern Territory, the prosecution of a police officer working in an

Indigenous community and the standing down of child protection workers in a remote Queensland community or the shooting of a person with mental illness as an act of police containment all highlight the more severe consequences of these tensions and statutory work more broadly. Little is known about how communities perceive and relate to these professionals or about how the professionals work through these dilemmas while maintaining their position as community members. Such dilemmas are likely to arise, we argue, in the work of social workers, health professionals, teachers, police officers, doctors, community corrections workers and other human service practitioners.

Professionals now assume multiple and sometimes competing responsibilities as judicial and statutory systems intersect with others such as health, education and human services. There is a proliferation of blurred boundaries. This is especially so for Indigenous practitioners working in Indigenous communities. Providing accessible, effective and timely health and human services to rural and remote areas has been problematic in recent decades. Rural citizens have demonstrably poorer health outcomes (AIHW, 1998; Humphreys, Jones, Jones & Mara, 2002) than those in cities. The rationalisation of many human services has also had severe impacts on rural communities (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 1999; Mc Donald & Zetlin, 2004). As well the overall scope of some problems has dramatically increased workloads and the need for services. For example, from 2001-02 to 2005-06, the number of reports of child abuse and neglect rose by 93% nationally (AIHW, 2007).

Several key questions arise, then, when considering these events and the context of rural and remote communities: What is the nature of the relationships between professionals and their communities? How are these issues negotiated in smaller communities? And more broadly, how can health and human services workers be better equipped to address multiple relationships and thus improve health, welfare and educational outcomes for rural citizens?

Some recent studies on living and working in rural communities

Our analysis of literature shows that there is an identifiable gap in our knowledge of the managed tensions experienced in the day to day routines of professionals with statutory responsibilities in rural communities. Indeed much of the research writing deals with issues relating directly to particular professions, rather than exploring the possible factors for comparison across professions.

In the field of Education there are a number of identifiable themes in the literature with respect to rural and remote education. Many studies have investigated issues of transitions (MacDonald, 2008; Collie, Willis, Paine & Windsor, 2007), teacher preparation (Lock, Reid, Green, Hastings, Cooper & White, 2009), technologies to overcome distance (Crump, Twyford, Littler, 2008; Devlin, Feraud, & Anderson, 2008) and place pedagogies (McConaghy, 2006; McConaghy, Graham, Patterson, 2006).

Similarly there are a number of 'threads' that are common across discipline areas. In social work recruiting and retaining professionals in rural and remote communities is a major problem well documented in social work (Cheers, 1992; Chenoweth, 2004; Lonne & Cheers, 1999; McAuliffe, Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2007), allied health (Gibbs & Keating, 1999; Ricketts, 2005), medicine (Veitch, Harte, Hays, Pashen & Clark, 1999; Jones, Humphreys & Adena, 2004) and education (Appleton, 1998; Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999; Herrington & Herrington, 2001). In professions such as policing or teaching, which typically mandate posting to rural and remote communities within the terms of employment, recruitment is less problematic for professionals who often serve shorter employment terms (Montgomery, 2003). However, difficulties often arise through lack of 'outsider' acceptance in rural cultures (Weisheit, Wells & Falcone, 1995). This can make the performance of work roles more difficult (Payne, Berg & Sun, 2005). At the same time, communities are

disadvantaged by such short-term postings because insufficient time is committed to building mutual trust (O'Connor, 2007).

It is widely accepted that statutory work and work with mandated clients poses significant practice and ethical challenges in all geographic locations (Burman, 2004; Trotter, 2006). Professionals in statutory contexts are confronted with the dual dilemmas of maintaining "social control" or promoting the general welfare of society and "helping" or fostering improved functions and self determination (Burman, 2004). It is argued that practice will be much more effective if these difficulties are able to be acknowledged and understood both by workers and their clients (Trotter, 2006). The degree to which these dualities are explicit varies across different professional groups. For example, in policing or correctional work, the social control agenda is clearly the major priority for intervention. We suggest that community members too have clearer expectations and awareness of these roles. In other fields such as child protection, teaching or mental health, the mandated role is less well known in the general community and thus the potential dilemmas are more covert. When such roles are performed in smaller communities these issues become intensified. In fields such as education, boundaries are often blurred in parent-teacher relationships. A significant factor in the relationships in school communities is the increased overlap and nature of dense complex social networks. Often relationships between schools and communities go beyond any sense of the client and service-provider "divide" in rural contexts (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk & Mulford, 2000; Wilkie & Newell, 2000). Further, as Sutcliffe (2001) notes "the school, particularly in rural communities, is often the strongest community institution. It is a gathering point, a centre symbolising community and a resource that can unite the community". This prominence of the school – and its staff – in the community can create tensions as teachers negotiate a delicate balance between their professional and personal life.

However, what the work cited above does not do, and where the literature in general is short on explanation, is in the production of research that looks through an interprofessional lens as it examines multiple professions with statutory responsibilities. In particular very few studies have examined the nature of statutory work in rural communities. Studies of child protection work in rural settings tend to focus on the attitudes of rural residents to child abuse (Calvert & Munsie-Benson, 1999) or the patterns of notification of child abuse in rural towns (Craft & Staudt, 1991; Manning & Cheers, 1995). A recent Qld state wide study (O'Connor & Cannon, 2007) of carers' perceptions of support for family members with mental illness identified conflicts between some professionals' discharging their statutory responsibilities and the compromised care of service consumers. However, these studies do not provide findings about the relationship between statutory workers and communities or how it plays out for professionals in the discharge of their duties or for communities in understanding and supporting a presence expected to support its integrity.

The ethical dilemmas of dual relationships in rural practice have been documented in psychology (Campbell & Gordon, 2003; Hargrove, 1986) and social work (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001; Chenoweth, 2004; Martinez-Brawley, 2000; McAuliffe, 2005b). Evidence from an early Queensland study on disability services (O'Connor, Bramley & Gunn, 1983) revealed a willingness of diverse professionals serving communities distant from their employing authority, to make local adjustments rather than slavishly follow central bureaucratic requests. These accounts not only outline the inevitability of dual relationships in rural and remote settings, but also acknowledge the strain on professionals trying to work within organisational parameters, legislative frameworks and ethical codes of conduct. There is little published beyond problem identification with few supported strategies for addressing concerns.

In other contexts where multiple relationships generate conflicts of allegiances, for example in the work of military psychologists stationed on aircraft carriers, Johnson, Ralph and Johnson (2005) argued that the primary allegiance is to the mandate authority. Using the

concept of embedded psychology, they suggested that the psychologist has profound power over the client's life and encounters multiple-role strain through boundary crossing. Cheers (1998) also used this notion of embeddedness to describe the context of rural social work practice. This refers to the way in which rural professionals are entwined in community life and thereby identify with and have allegiance to their community while executing organisational and legal responsibilities as agents of the state. Cultural contexts are very pervasive in determining the types of relationships and networks that are available. As McDowell (1999) puts it "places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial – they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the locations or site of experience". These factors can severely impact on a professional's capacity to meet work commitments and function successfully as a community member.

Our brief review of some of the relevant recent research has led us to argue that there is little evidence that research focussing on professionals with statutory responsibilities living and working in a rural community is a concept that has been adequately described. We suggest that this kind of knowledge is a critical precursor to reconceptualising approaches to improving health, welfare and educational outcomes for rural communities. It is the kind of research we believe is necessary that we turn in the final part of the paper.

Managing tensions in professional statutory practice: Essential research for living and working in rural communities

The ARC Discovery project described in this section builds upon previous work of recruitment and retention issues for child protection practitioners in rural Queensland the findings from which highlighted the difficulties for many child protection practitioners in carrying out statutory responsibilities such as removing a child from a family in small communities where they also lived. These activities and the reaction from community members were reported as highly stressful and fear-provoking by many practitioners. Juggling the demands of statutory work, the needs of clients and becoming accepted members of the local community emerged as a crucial issue influencing their decisions to remain in or leave their position.

The "Managing Tensions in Professional Statutory Practice" project aims to develop knowledge about how communities and those professionals providing key health, welfare and educational services can work more effectively for more positive outcomes for individuals, families and whole communities and how such services change when impacted by local issues and place imperatives. The research involves interdisciplinary issues across different professions and explores and examines the ethical issues confronting them and to identify possible factors for comparison across these professions. Specifically the research aims to address the following research questions:

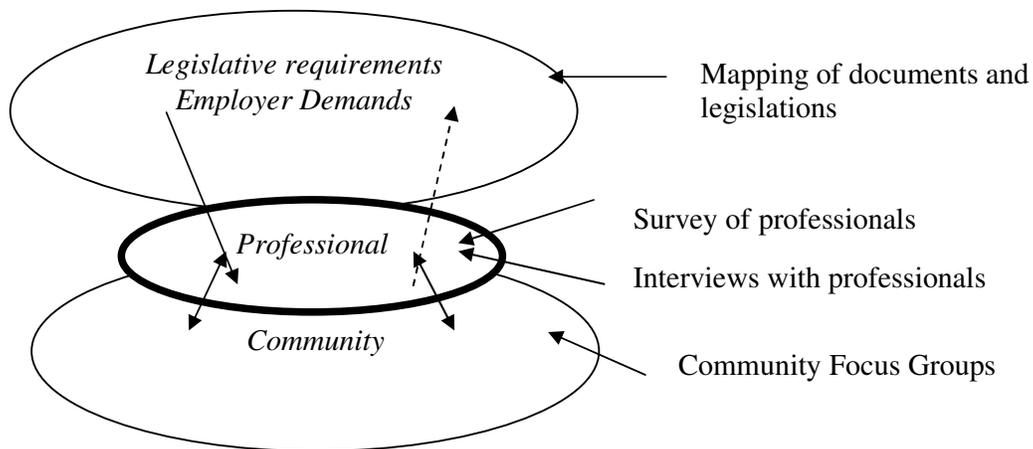
1. What statutory responsibilities and requirements exist for professionals in rural and remote communities in Qld?
2. What are the experiences of professionals with statutory responsibilities who live and work in rural communities?
3. What are the experiences and views of community members about their relationships with these professionals?
4. How do professionals balance the competing demands between the central authority (agency) and local relationships?
5. How do these tensions impact on ethical practice and professional agency? and
6. How can theories of power and governmentality explain these phenomena?

The study is innovative in that it is seeking to combine theories of rurality and small communities with power and governmentality to explain and address the experience of professionals and citizens. The study design provides an opportunity to develop new methods in qualitative research through the scenario based focus groups. This approach is unique and should provide not only a rich analysis of social work, teacher education and interprofessional/interagency teamwork expertise and knowledge, is ideally suited to grapple with the interrelationships of theory and practice.

As a project that also includes rural and remote human service practice in Indigenous communities, this is a unique opportunity to explore a little known Australian field – that of statutory human service practice within an Indigenous environment. Community analyses of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are well documented, both in sociology and anthropology (Eckermann, Dowd, Chong, Nixon, Gray & Johnson, 2005; Saggars & Gray, 1991). What is new here is the detailed analysis of practice within the statutory environment and the impact of that practice (both positive and negative) on the community itself within the context of cultural, political and geographic environment in which it is enacted.

This 3-year project uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to map the terrain of rural and remote statutory work, to explore the nature of the relationships between professionals and communities and examine how professionals manage ethical and allegiance conflicts which arise. The key elements of analysis in the study are statutory programs and roles, the professionals performing these roles and the communities in which they live and work. Figure 1 illustrates the site for the study and the corresponding methods used.

Figure 1: Elements of study and corresponding data methods



As a way of defining the elements of this study the following explanations of the concepts have been adopted.

Statutory work: Human service agencies and workers increasingly operate under legislative regimes that require them to do certain things in their work or avoid other activities. A number of professionals have statutory duties and powers, which may be specific (e.g. mandatory reporting) or more general. Much of this work happens within a complex arrangement of interlocking and legislative provisions, regulations and employer procedures – e.g. privacy legislation (Kennedy, 2004). It also highlights the importance of the interrelationships between central control and working in dynamic rural/remote environments. In

this study we are including activities such as policing, mandatory reporting, child protection work, regulation of mental health patients and enforcing community correction orders.

Professionals involved in statutory work: For the purposes of this study across the health, justice, education and human service systems, the following professionals will be included in the study: police officers, corrective services officers, social workers and welfare workers, teachers, mental health professionals, medical practitioners, and allied health professionals. Some of these professionals may encounter statutory responsibilities infrequently (e.g. teachers having to report suspected child abuse) while others deal with statutory work in most of their daily tasks (e.g. police officers).

Rural and remote communities: The study draws on several approaches to determining rural/remoteness. First, communities will be assessed using Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) scores. It is anticipated that communities will include Moderately Accessible, Remote and Very Remote communities. Second, degrees of disadvantage will be taken into account using Socio-economic Index for Areas SEIFA, 2001. Qualitative definitions, while recognising that population size and distance are a contributing elements to what constitutes 'rural' focus on the cultural and relational dimensions of places and people (Halsey, 2007). As well we will take into account the different organisational definitions of rural and remote, for example across health, education and policing.

This project takes up the conceptual framework of governmentality (Foucault, 1982) for two major reasons: first, to test our hypothesis that operating within a human services statutory environment offers an example of a 'new' form of governing and second, to begin to unravel the complexities of governance in remote environments and how these are shaped by geography and culture. Foucault suggests that such complexities of government are best understood as a 'complex play of supports in mutual engagement' (1980) a factor that also links this project to the crucial role of the practitioner in building social capital (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 2001, 1999). Rose (1996) suggests that it is the way in which government acts to govern, through 'mentalities' (techniques/rationales) (Dean, 1999) and these provide the framework for our governmentality analysis. As Herbert-Cheshire (2001) points out, these can incorporate a whole range of practical mechanisms including human service programs; calculations; documents; policies; procedures and discipline frameworks.

Our contribution to a deeper understanding will take up the practice of the delivery of policy within a statutory environment and examine it in detail to explore Foucault's (1988) proposition that it is in the 'mundane' and 'ordinary' that a real understanding of power can be developed. Our previous work suggests that impact on various geographic communities of this practice environment and the dynamics of 'ordinary power' need to be better understood and examined (Chenoweth, 2004). To this end, we incorporate within our framework the model established by Martinez-Brawley (2000) of 'community-oriented practice' which suggests principles of re-interpreted confidentiality and that of the community as 'potentially nourishing' – an approach which appears to stand in some contradiction to the statutory, legislative approach. Woven into this framework is also the issue of geography, particularly of place, and its cultural significance, and therefore a spatial analysis to our project is crucial as our previous work has shown the power of location away from centralising forces to 're-interpret' practice and adopt more flexible approaches (Chenoweth & Stehlik, 1999). In this analysis we will be guided by explorations of space and power as applied to rural medical practitioners (Kenny, 2004; Kenny & Duckett, 2004) and by the groundbreaking work from the UK by Milligan (2001) which takes a geographical analysis of the impact of social care policy as well as the spatial inter-relationships between the formal (paid) and informal (voluntary) sectors. This approach will be a unique one in the field, and one which should provide a rich analysis and the potential for long term outcomes.

Conclusion

Our discussion in this paper has led us to the view that there are a number of matters related to managing tensions of statutory work in rural and remote communities which research should now be focussed. We argue that we need:

- To map the scope and practice requirements of statutory roles across health, justice, education and human services
- To determine the characteristics of the relationships between professionals with statutory responsibility who live and work in rural communities, and the communities in which they operate
- To explore the strategies different professionals use effectively to negotiate the multiple relationships generated by their work and living situation
- To determine what factors contribute to more collaborative relationships and more effective outcomes of statutory work in rural and remote communities
- To identify the inter-relationships between working in rural/remote environments and being 'managed' from central agencies or departments.

Our suggestions here help to underscore the importance of the kind of knowledge we are saying is necessary. We have presented an argument in this paper that began with an assumption that there is a discernable interest and focus on issues regarding rural and remote issues. This research predominately focuses on particular professions or disciplines with a definite thematic thread connecting common issues. The result of our thinking is the claim that to better equip professional working in rural and remote communities will only be improved when there is a much more substantial knowledge base and indeed theoretical explanation about the tensions professionals with statutory responsibilities face whilst living and working in rural communities that presently exists.

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