inseparable, and provides an alternative theoretical foundation for efforts toward social transformation. The more one explores this interdependence and seeks a transition toward sustainability, the more we realize the impossibility of eliminating ecological and social injustices without transforming the structures and belief systems that inform modern society.

John Coates, PhD
St. Thomas University
Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada


The rural context of social work practice is typically portrayed as a challenging work environment that is resource impoverished. New social workers trained in urban environments often experience difficulties associated with personal and professional transitions when immersed in the realities of rural areas. Thus, it is refreshing to see an entire collection that holds strengths and asset building as a central premise in rural social work. This book will appeal to social work educators, students, novice and seasoned rural practitioners as it draws on theory, practice experience, and research in demonstrating the application of the approaches.

Sectioned into five parts that coincide with relevant content areas, the editors are very clear in delineating their viewpoint through the introduction of the theoretical perspectives of Kretzmann and McKnight in community assets, the developmental assets framework focusing on children and youth by the Search Institute, and Sherraden’s work on using assets as “an antipoverty strategy” (p. 3). This effectively sets the stage for examination within the contexts presented.

Part I, “Introduction to Rural Social Work” explores historical and existing realities that are worthy of consideration. Jackie Olaveson, Pat Conway and Chad Shaver describe the complexity of defining rurality, and argue that a consistent definition and measure is desirable. The au-
thors, however, do not critically examine the fact that definitions of rurality are largely determined by urban entities that impose perceptions emanating from an urban perspective. This seeming need to categorize, rooted in empiricism and supported by the authors, leads to the danger of neglecting to recognize the uniqueness of communities when rural areas are perceived as equivalent, based on the measuring index of choice. Michael R. Daley and Freddie L. Avant recognize this aspect in their declaration that “definitions of rurality that focus primarily on community characteristics lead us to an environmental perspective, as opposed to a person-in-environment perspective” (p. 36). Their proposed framework includes the relational aspects within and between systems.

Paul Stuart begins to describe the structural inequalities inherent in the systems in an historical review of “Social Welfare and Rural People,” and Samuel A. Hickman provides an article on the background of the Rural Social Work Caucus and work resulting in the “NASW Professional Policy Statement for Rural Social Work.” While both articles are important in recognizing the uniqueness of social work with rural people and how this differs from urban practice, this section does little to confront the oppressive influences of urban power.

Part II, “Human Behavior and Rural Environments” presents a collection of articles that explore strengths and asset building within a variety of contexts. Drawing on diverse communities including Freddie L. Avant’s “Afrocentric Perspective,” Wilma Cordova’s “Life in a Colonia,” and Liddell L. Madden, Jay Bishop, and Alan B. Kirk’s work with Haitian immigrants, contributors to this section challenge the reader to discern strengths despite conditions of abject poverty by focusing on traditions of community and culture, natural helping networks, and aspects of spirituality. Ted R. Watkins examines the use of natural support networks in mobilizing help for people, with two case examples, and at the same time recognizes unique considerations around ethical issues concerning confidentiality and dual relationships in a natural helping network.

“Practice Issues in Rural Contexts,” the third section of the book, contains pragmatic and useful practice applications that are valuable for rural social workers. Shirley M. Haulotte and Suzanne Oliver present a primer for new rural social workers through their proposal that an analysis of the community be conducted as an antecedent to providing services. It is interesting to note that they do not examine the social worker as an outsider in a new community nor the process involved in becoming accepted within a rural community. Nevertheless, their work strikes
me as a collection of helpful considerations that would have saved me many trial and error experiences in my days as a neophyte rural social worker.

Ruben Rodriguez, H. Stephen Cooper, and Linda Morales examine community response to the needs of its members in a Mexican immigrant colonia, and how assets contribute to a collective response and support the sustenance of culture. Within the described context, there appears to be a level of acceptance of oppression. For example, the asset of quality family time is identified within the reality that many men in the community are working long hours resulting in the challenge to find free time for family. This appears to be a reframe of the oppressive circumstances such as low wages and difficult living conditions, and does little to build on the strengths of the people to challenge the oppression. Likewise, the description of the community coming together to improve the road is a positive move for community solidarity and contribution, but does little to demand the accountability of the structure that allows private landowners to neglect the conditions of the colonia that is built on their property.

Tamara S. Davis promotes the use of a “wraparound” model that incorporates strengths and asset building, and has true merit in rural practice as a collaborative response to family issues. The concept of true partnerships, the use of flexible interventions to meet the needs of the family rather than slotting the family into existing programs, and an emphasis on cultural competency, all serve to empower families within a supportive environment.

Part IV, “Policy Issues Affecting Rural Populations” contains articles that explore the implications of policy for rural people, and while there are notations of structural ineffectiveness and suggestions for change, most of the articles are disappointingly silent about the need to mobilize for structural change. Instead, the majority of authors present various sides to the issues without forming a definitive stance based on critical analysis. One notable exception is “Voices from the Mountains” by Barry L. Locke and Lucinda A. Potter. In their study examining the impact of welfare reform on past and current recipients in West Virginia, and the work of the West Virginia Welfare Reform Coalition, the authors describe efforts of collective consciousness raising and advocacy that confront ineffective policy directives. Recognizing the capacities and feedback of the users of the “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families” program directly influences the group’s direction. The statement “The degree to which social welfare policy continues to be predicated on the assumptions that the recipients are somehow very different,
and in need of some form of behavior change and management, is likely to result in continuing failure . . .” (p. 271), impresses me as one of the strongest statements linking strengths orientation with structural change.

The final section, “Using Research to Evaluate Practice in Rural Settings” exposes the reader to various research methods and applications that are useful in rural practice. Susan Murty’s “Mapping Community Assets” presents a useful practical framework for researching the strengths in a community. Leela Thomas, Patricia Albaugh, and Bernard Albaugh present a powerful description of participatory research as applied within an American Indian community to empower the people. The authors identify what I consider to be a central and foundational principle of rural social work practice in that “. . . [real] community development can only occur through dialogue between outside experts and the people of the community. Dialogue implies a relationship that is horizontal. A horizontal relationship is based on the ideology of equality and reciprocity. Thus, development occurs not from top-down but rather from inside-out . . .” (p. 291).

From an educational perspective, the book clearly demonstrates the realities of rural social work practice, identifies the uniqueness of diverse populations, and makes a strong statement that rural social work requires skills and creativity specific to the context. It challenges us to adopt a new way of thinking in relation to rural communities and people, enabling us to discover the richness of the strengths, capacities and assets that are inherent in people’s lives. While it does not neglect the reality of issues and challenges, the broadened perspective provides opportunities for intervention that uses and enhances existing strengths. For populations that have historically been oppressed at the hands of political and urban powers, the collection predominantly shies away from using strengths and asset building perspective to challenge structural inequities, and the book would be enhanced by the inclusion of focused analysis of this area.

_Brenda Joyce, MSW, RSW_  
_Instructor, Social Work Program_  
_Red Deer College_  
_Red Deer, Alberta, Canada_