

---

# Woolsheds, wet weather gear and the West Coast: Social work practice in Taranaki

*Lesley Pitt*

---

*A paper presented to the ninth Biennial National Rural Remote Social Work Conference, 'Rural Communities Inspiring Social Care' held in Geelong, Australia, July 30 to 31, 2009.*

*Lesley Pitt is a social work tutor at the Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki based in New Plymouth.*

---

## Introduction

Practising social work outside the city limits is a unique experience and this paper is a celebration of it. Taranaki, a province where farming, particularly dairy farming, remains a significant part of life, is used as a location to explore social work in a rural context and a case study of a 'typical' Taranaki dairy farming family is used to illustrate points. The story is a composite of many of the families I have worked with over the years practising social work in a rural context.

The dominant discourse in social work is urban (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005); in fact it is difficult to locate current literature from Aotearoa New Zealand about rural social work. This paper is an attempt to start addressing this 'gap' and inspire discussion about rural social work in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What is rural is explored despite the difficulties in definition. The rural 'client' is considered using the case study and shows that while having similarities with the rest of the population, there are traits, lifestyle choices and occupational factors which make rural dwellers a unique group and this in turn impacts on the way social work is practised in Taranaki. For the rural practitioner a number of factors impinge on their practice which is significantly different than urban social work, and these are drawn attention to here to 'give voice' to rural social work.

## Geographical context

Taranaki is a province on the west coast of the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is the smallest province in the country at 9,729 square kilometers (Dove, Hill & Smither, 1987). The land is 'young' (Goldsmith, 2008, p. 13) and is made up of 'volcanoes and their ring plains, and the broken hill country to the east' (Goldsmith, 2008, p. 13). This geography lends itself to dairy farming on the ring plain (where the case study family live) and sheep and beef farming and forestry in the hill country.

A backdrop to the lives of the residents of Taranaki is the mountain, called Taranaki (for a time known as Egmont). The mountain affects weather patterns, land use, and provides a

---

readily available recreational resource (Dove, Hill & Smither, 1987). It is a part of the identity and spiritual being of the people who live in the province (Goldsmith, 2008).

Taranaki has been settled for 'nearly 800 years' (Goldsmith, 2008, p. 13). Māori first settled in the area, migrating from East Polynesia. 'As early English observers noted, every inch of ground was named and owned by Māori, under a land tenure system that was as complex as it was different from anything that incoming settlers had ever seen' (Keenan, 2008, p. 101). After the arrival of European settlers in the 1840s tension built around land and its use which resulted in warfare in the 1860s. The tension has continued, and claims have been made to the Waitangi Tribunal for compensation for the loss of land (Waitangi Tribunal, 1996).

### **What is rural in this practice context?**

What is rural varies from location to location (Lohmann and Lohmann, 2005). The meaning of being rural is different for each person (Pitt, 1998) and depends on such things as proximity to services, the nature of the community in which a person lives, their occupation, that of their partner/spouse and the type and size of the farm (Rhenisch, 1980). In Taranaki it also depends on cultural background (for example, there is a significant population of families who immigrated from Switzerland during the 20th century living in central and south Taranaki), and if Māori, an iwi affiliation.

In seeking an answer to what is rural a perusal of Statistics New Zealand's website (2008) shows there is no clear definition in Aotearoa New Zealand and there is no universally accepted international definition. Defining what is rural as opposed to urban is described by Mellow (2005, p. 51) as 'problematic'. Statistics New Zealand outline a continuum from highly urban to highly remote/rural and within Taranaki the range of the continuum is present. In terms of the rural-urban continuum the only part of the province considered a main urban area is New Plymouth (Statistics New Zealand, 2008). The remainder moves on the continuum from satellite urban, such as Bell Block, to highly rural/remote such as in the east of Taranaki where there is steep hill-country which is partly farmed with sheep and beef and partly bush (Stratford District Council, 2009). Warea, the community where our case study clients live, is described by Statistics New Zealand (2008) as a rural area with low urban influence which means that the majority of people work in the area and there is a focus on 'things rural'.

For this paper a simple definition is used to indicate what rural practice is: working with clients who live outside the 50 kilometre per hour zone speed limit for driving. For most social workers in Taranaki this means their practice is a blend of rural and urban. Hence for social workers in Taranaki the need to understand the issues for their clients and the issues of practice which will arise in a rural context is as important for sound practice as is the urban social work discourse they are trained in.

### **Case study**

Trevor and Sharlene (pseudonyms used) met four years ago at a wedding. Sharlene was the bridesmaid for a friend from work (an accounting firm in New Plymouth) and the groom was Trevor's cousin. They 'went out' for a year, got engaged and lived together before they got married. Trevor is a 39% (variable order) share milker for his parents on their farm in

---

Warea. Trevor is a fifth generation 'kiwi' and calls himself a New Zealander. Sharlene is the child of British immigrants and she has contact with her family in the United Kingdom, staying with them in the past when travelling on her 'OE'.

Things went well after they got married. Sharlene commuted to New Plymouth to work each day and Trevor carried on share milking for his parents. Trevor was aware that Sharlene found the cows a bit 'scary' and didn't like the smell in the shed so he didn't ask her to milk often. They both liked sport and this took up a lot of their weekends.

Sharlene didn't mind living in Warea as she saw her work friends every day and played netball in New Plymouth every weekend. There was tension between her and Trevor's parents. Sharlene felt uncomfortable by the way they visited constantly and walked into the house without knocking. She had a sense they didn't like her much but nothing was said.

Both Sharlene and Trevor wanted a 'family' and were delighted when Sharlene found out she was pregnant 14 months ago. The pregnancy went well but the labour was difficult. Their son, Jack, was born by caesarian section which was a disappointment as she wanted a natural childbirth. Sharlene stopped work a month before Jack was born as they both agree that mothers should be at home with their children. Things are going well on the farm and Trevor thought they could afford to do this.

To start with Sharlene liked being home with the baby but after six weeks she started worrying and feeling 'down'. Trevor was supportive initially but lately has been 'short' with her and asks her what she does all day. Some days Sharlene can't stand being in the house and goes into town (New Plymouth). Trevor has told her he's not impressed by this 'waste of money'. He told Sharlene his mother stayed home when he was growing up and found things to do so why can't she? Sharlene is aware that her mother-in-law gardened as the garden at her house, which her mother-in-law established when she lived there, is enormous. Sharlene's mother-in-law 'calls in' most days and Sharlene feels she has to stop what she's doing to make her a coffee. Sharlene is aware that come September she will be expected to feed the calves. She has no idea how she's going to manage this and dreads having to take Jack out in the cold and mud.

### **Who are rural clients in Taranaki?**

Rural residents in Taranaki describe themselves as different from 'townies', they believe they are distinct (Mellow, 2005). While they have more connections to the urban community than in the past there are some factors, which clustered together, make them 'different'. Sharlene is struggling with understanding this in her move from an urban lifestyle to the farm at Warea, a small community on the coast between New Plymouth and Opunake. It is also worth noting that Trevor is working as a variable order sharemilker (39%) which means he is a self employed contractor and receives a percentage of milk income from Fonterra but is also responsible for a percentage of costs (DairyNZ, 2009). For Sharlene and Trevor this means the family income will fluctuate from year to year.

Rural clients' lives are linked with the environment. As opposed to those working in 'town' jobs, rural people's work is generally outside which means it is affected by the climate and seasons. Social workers need to be aware of what is going on in the lives of their

---

clients; for example, wet days are good for home visits as less farm work can be done. In Taranaki where farming is dominated by the dairy industry and sheep and beef farming is next common, spring is a significant and pressured time. This is when calving and lambing traditionally take place and when Sharlene is needed to feed calves. In dairy farming calves are removed from their mothers shortly after birth and the replacement stock (female) are hand reared.

The farming environment affects leisure activities; for example, Murphy's (1989) study of rural women found that gardening is a popular activity as it is carried out at home and can be combined with childcare and farm work. An advantage of gardening when farming is the ability to expand the garden by moving the fence further out and using the paddock. For Sharlene's mother-in-law her garden was a significant leisure activity and one on which she may have used extensive amounts of time, creative energy and finances. Taranaki has an annual garden festival which also has a fringe festival including a significant number of rural gardens. Other favoured activities are fishing, hunting, surfing and team sports like rugby union and netball. One of the ways of gaining entry in local communities is through sports teams and when working with Sharlene her interest in sport may be a way she could increase her social contacts. As a practitioner, encouraging Sharlene to continue involvement in a local sports team may be more useful than urban options to increase social networks such as coffee groups.

As they live in such a close alliance with their environment rural dwellers adapt and develop a sense of stoicism in order to cope. Working in the farming or forestry industry is physically demanding and involves risk. This risk can be fatal and a number of children have died in recent years in Taranaki as a result of farming accidents – one child was killed in a 'quad' bike accident and another drowned in an unfenced effluent pond. Rural Women is a lobby group seeking to reduce farm accidents. While membership of this organisation is dropping it continues to be an important community network for social workers and can be a way for women such as Sharlene to connect with other women in Warea and would enable her to address some of her fears about Jack's safety.

In farming, dealing with death is part of the daily work, for example, killing sick animals and sending 'bobby' (bull) calves 'off farm' to be killed. This is viewed as something which has to be done. Sharlene's response to being in the cow shed could exacerbate her difference as a 'townie' and may be an issue for Trevor both at an emotional level as a rejection of his 'world' and at a practical level as women are often a 'labour unit' when dairy farming, particularly to milk cows, feed out hay and other supplementary feed to live stock and to hand rear calves.

Practicality is another characteristic of rural clients, who don't want 'fluffy' service delivery but practical, 'down to earth' assistance. Due to the relative isolation of rural dwellers they need to be self reliant (Li, 2006) as they lack the infrastructure provided in urban areas; water reticulation, sewerage, rubbish collection and tar sealed roads. In parts of Taranaki (particularly but not exclusively in the north and east) roading is poor and this adds to isolation and the need to be self-reliant. For Sharlene the cost of travelling to New Plymouth from Warea and the time it takes may preclude regular visits to friends. Ways to address this could be considered when working with Sharlene, such as regular visits to town combined with farm business so that she would not be criticised for 'wasting money'.

---

Rural occupations and leisure activities are practical and require multiple skills such as horticulture, animal husbandry, accountancy, engineering, driving and so on. The roles of rural people are also multifaceted. In research on rural women in Taranaki it was found that the women researched were involved with 'housework, farming, voluntary work, care giving and paid work' (Pitt, 1998, p. 67). Social workers practising in Taranaki will find clients have multiple roles, a strength which can be enhanced, for example, in schools with low numbers of pupils, where a high proportion of the parents become involved in various capacities such as governance, fund-raising and other volunteer work. If they do not do this the school is no longer viable. Sharlene may find expectations of community involvement and voluntary work placed on her that she is not ready to accept. However refusal to participate in the community may increase her isolation. Using her background in accounting is a skill likely to be useful to community groups and gives her a way of engaging with others which has some familiarity for her while other aspects of community life are foreign.

The rural population in Taranaki tends to be conservative in their values, norms and ways of behaving (Mellow, 2005) which was described by a respondent in Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (2008, p. 27) research as 'small town mentality'. Rural voting reflects the traditional values; electorates in Taranaki have supported the National Party (centre right), although this may also reflect the high numbers of self employed in the province ([www.national.org.nz](http://www.national.org.nz)). It can be difficult for women marrying in to farming families in Taranaki to be confronted with traditional values and ideologies. Sharlene has experienced this with her 'in-laws' and has personalised it. However, they are likely to be unsure about how to build a relationship with a woman from 'town' who is well-travelled. If Sharlene considers the anxiety they may have about her 'city sophistication' she may be able to 'chip away' at their reserve, alleviating some of their fears about her.

Traditionally farming and rural industries have been the domain of men and the nature of the work is physical (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2008). Masculinity is valued and useful in terms of the nature of the work and patriarchal social relations dominate (Pitt, 1998), again creating difficulties for women marrying in to a family. The ownership of the farm or the herd (cows), if share milking, can also be an issue. This may add to tensions with Trevor's family; they may consider the future of the family farm is at risk if Trevor and Sharlene divorce and would likely want some reassurance the land and stock will remain within their family.

Patrilineal transfer of land has resulted in the transfer of power from father to son. Women are often the ones marrying in to a farming family where older women have power (mother-in-law) and young women are commonly excluded from decision making (Millard, 1992). Sharlene is experiencing this powerlessness and feeling confused, bewildered and alienated. Land succession is important to farming families in Taranaki (Pitt, 1998) and it supports patriarchal social structures. In Taranaki and elsewhere families will often go to great lengths to keep the farm within the family, which creates tension and can leave women vulnerable if relationships end.

Due to land succession it is common for Taranaki families to live intergenerationally in one place (Carmichael & Kennard, 1999). Trevor and Sharlene living in Trevor's childhood home is a common scenario. This can lead to mother-in-law / daughter-in-law tension or conflict. Sharlene may find it useful to involve her mother-in-law in her life, for example,

---

having her work in her garden which will reduce Sharlene's workload while giving her mother-in-law a way to contribute, to feel involved and to carry on gardening projects she started when it was her home.

### **Issues for rural clients**

An obvious issue for clients and in this instance for Sharlene, is isolation. This is physical, due to the distance to 'town' and the state of the client's transportation. Warea, where Sharlene and Trevor live, is far enough from New Plymouth to mean regular trips into 'town' would not be viable. Carmichael and Kennard (1999) discuss the families they work with and state they 'are often forced to rely on each other for all their needs as their nearest neighbor may be several kilometers away' (p. 34). They also cite transportation difficulties as an issue as 'clients cannot access services without help' (Carmichael & Kennard, 1999, p. 35). This is particularly the case for outsiders like Sharlene who move into a district without any local support and also for poor clients who are more likely to have transportation issues such as no vehicle or an unreliable one.

Difficulty accessing services is compounded by a lack of services, relative to those available to urban dwellers (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2008). This includes lack of child care, particularly flexible childcare to fit with the seasonal nature of farming and the time of day farm work happens. Dairy farmers, in particular, experience difficulties with this, and at times children are unsupervised in the house while their parents are milking. For Sharlene, living in Warea means there is no formal child care available and she is dependent on Trevor's family or other women in the community for support. Establishing a Warea-based babysitting club may be a helpful intervention which Sharlene could make use of.

There has been a reduction of services as the result of social and economic policies, for example, rural Taranaki communities have experienced a reduction in health care and closure of schools in recent years. Warea Primary School was closed in 2004 as a result of a Ministry of Education review of coastal schools. The school closures impact educationally but also socially, as the school is often the 'centre' of community life (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2008).

Economic restructuring has led to a reduction in rural employment (Carmichael & Kennard, 1999) which reflects global trends (Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005). The impact is particularly 'felt' by young people, women with limited options and opportunities for work (Millard, 1992) and Māori, who work in industries which support farming such as freezing works. As the rural-urban drift continues Trevor may find it difficult to find farm workers or relief milkers which 'ties' him and Sharlene to the farm all year round other than early winter when the cows are 'dry' (not being milked). The labour shortage makes it more likely Sharlene will be called upon for farm work.

The economic changes have resulted in a growing number of rural poor; an issue in Taranaki but also the rest of the country (Levett & Pomeroy, 1998; Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2008). People move to rural communities because they are 'attracted by cheaper housing and low rents, and many of the available houses are farm cottages that are no longer needed for farm workers' (Carmichael & Kennard, 1999, p. 34). Rising costs of petrol and transport issues then compound their poverty and isolation. For Sharlene recent rises

---

in fuel costs increases her isolation due to the cost of travelling to New Plymouth to visit her friends and family.

Communication is also a factor; in rural Taranaki there is inadequate internet access, poor cell phone reception in some areas and land line telephone communication is expensive because of toll calls (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 2008). Warea has poor internet access and cell phone coverage, which makes it difficult for Sharlene to maintain 'old' friendships and may impede her access to services; for example midwives are not funded to visit pregnant women who live in rural areas. Sharlene will also have to travel substantial distances to access a general practitioner and other health services.

### **Issues for rural social workers**

The dominant discourse in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is urban (Mellow, 2005) but rural social work has a 'unique character and faces different challenges than its urban counterparts' (Carmichael & Kennard, 1999, p. 34). When practising with rural clients like Sharlene and Trevor, social workers have to adapt professional concepts from an urban context and mould them to fit (Mellow, 2005) as well as coming up with creative solutions to problems.

One area where there are differences between the urban and rural discourses of social work is around relationships and boundaries (Zubrzycki, 2006). The rural context necessitates practice which is more informal (Mellow, 2005) and workers often have multiple roles in the community. Due to the small nature of the community, workers are visible and more likely to be known in other roles in their life, for example, visiting a school to interview a child where the social worker's own children are also enrolled. The reality for social workers in rural areas is they will have dual relationships and have to find ways to manage this (Mellow, 2005). The advantage of this is that workers have extensive and complex networks they can use in their practice (Carmichael & Kennard, 1999). In working with Sharlene and Trevor, being aware of informal networks and supports in the Warea community will be useful. Having people who live in Warea discuss how they deal with day-to-day farming life, for example, how they manage young children while feeding calves, may help Sharlene build her resilience and explore coping strategies.

In rural communities such as Warea there is still a reluctance to accept help from outsiders and in working with Trevor and Sharlene the practitioner needs to be aware that Trevor and his family may struggle to accept professional support. Social workers in Taranaki have to 'work particularly hard to win people's trust before they can effectively offer assistance' (Mellow, 2005, p. 55). In research on rural women in Aotearoa New Zealand it was found that respondents believed their problems were personal business and they did not want to bother people with their concerns (McMath & Smith, 1989). The traditional norms and values of rural clients mean confidentiality is important. In a small community neighbours are likely to notice a strange car in a driveway; it is difficult but important to maintain the privacy of clients, as will the case be for not only Trevor and Sharlene but also for Trevor's family who may feel ashamed that they have had to accept help from an outsider.

Related to the lack of services is the potential for professional isolation. In Taranaki social workers may be the only member of the profession employed by an agency or they may

---

work for a New Plymouth agency but be working in an 'outreach' situation. This can result in a sense of professional loneliness and leave workers without the day-to-day support provided by membership of a social work team. Workers need to find ways to get professional support in creative ways, getting support from other sources or other professions and using technology to keep connected with colleagues.

Rural practitioners need to match their practice to the work and lifestyle of their client group (Mellow, 2005). Farming is not a 'nine to five' job; it is seasonal and weather dependent. Social workers in Taranaki need to be cognisant of what their clients may be doing at different times of the day or year as, for example, it is unrealistic to expect clients to see us during milking, shearing or hay making. If visiting in spring, the best time to visit Trevor and Sharlene is going to be the middle of the day, between milking and after calves have been fed. Like all good social work practice, building relationships is crucial and 'learning to dance to the rhythms of rural life is essential' (Mellow, 2005, p. 68).

## Conclusion

This paper has looked at issues for rural social workers in a general sense and tied these ideas to Taranaki, referring to a case study of a dairy farming couple. For a woman like Sharlene moving into a rural community and becoming part of a farming family can be a complex, lonely and confusing experience. Good social work practice with Sharlene taking account of her rural context can assist her becoming part of the Warea community and adapt to her new environment. To do this effectively practitioners need to be aware of the daily lived experience of their rural clients and adapt their practices to deal with the lack of services and isolation as well as with their own complex relationships and roles.

## References

- Accident Compensation Corporation (2009). *Farm safety*. Retrieved on March 19 2009 from [www.acc.co.nz](http://www.acc.co.nz).
- Carmichael, V. & Kennard, J. (1999). A country practice. *Social Work Now*, 13.
- DairyNZ (2009). *Finding employment on a dairy farm: Your guide to a kiwi way of life*. New Zealand: DairyNZ.
- Dove, J., Hill, D. & Smither, E. (1987). *Taranaki*. Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Goldsmith, S. (Ed.). (2008). *Taranaki whenua: Life blood legacy*. New Plymouth: Taranaki Regional Council.
- Keenan, D. (2008). An ancient lan. In S. Goldsmith (Ed.). *Taranaki whenua: Life blood legacy* (pp.101-111). New Plymouth: Taranaki Regional Council.
- Levett, A. & Pomeroy, A. (Eds.) (1998). *Managing social transformation in rural New Zealand*. Proceedings of UNESCO/MAF Seminar.
- Li, H. (2006, June). Rural older adults' access barriers to in-home and community-based services. *Social Work Research*, 30(2).
- Lohmann, N. & Lohmann, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Rural social work practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McMath, M. & Smith, R. (1988). *The place of alcohol in the lives of some rural Eastern-Southland women*. Auckland: University of Auckland.
- Mellow, M. (2005). The work of rural professionals: Doing the Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft gavotte. *Rural Sociology*, 70(1).
- Millard, M. (1992). Rural women. In C. Briar, R. Munford, & M. Nash (Eds.). *Superwoman where are you? Social policy and women's experience* (pp. 234-247). Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press.
- Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (2008). *Beliefs and values in research: Urban and rural perspective of the primary sector*.
- Murphy, M. (1989). *The leisure of rural women in New Zealand: A pilot survey*. Unpublished MA (Applied) thesis (Recreation Administration), Victoria University, Wellington.
- Pitt, L. (1998). *Patriarchs, paddocks and the personal: Five women from the Wharehuia/Te Popo district talk about their lives*. Unpublished Masters of Social Work thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North.
- Rhenisch, L. (1980). Is a feminist mood rising in rural America? In H. Johnson (Ed.). *Rural human services: A book of readings* (pp. 35-38). Illinois: F. E. Peacock Publishers Inc.

- 
- Rural Women New Zealand (2008). *Leptospirosis – the need to know*. Retrieved October 9 2008 from <http://www.ruralwomen.org>.
- Statistics New Zealand (2008). *New Zealand: An urban/rural profile*. Retrieved March 13 2009 from <http://www.stats.govt.nz>.
- Stratford District Council (2008). *Statistics and history*. Retrieved March 13 2009 from <http://www.stratford.govt.nz>.
- Waitangi Tribunal (1996). *The Taranaki report: Kaupapa Tuatahi*. Retrieved March 20 2009 from <http://www.waitangi-tribunal.govt.nz>.
- Zubrzycki, J. (2006). Exploring the construction of personal and professional boundaries in social work. *Social Work Review*, 18(3).
-