How do people in fields such as education, ministry, nursing, and social work function effectively in rural communities, when the preparation they receive to do so often implies an urban model of the world? To become attuned to the individuals, networks, issues, and traditions within such communities, what sorts of learning are involved for them, both professionally and personally, and what is the influence of such learning on the life of the community they serve?

The aim of the research presented in this session is to seek answers to these questions while developing a model of rural life based on the “narrative root metaphor” (Sarbin, 1986) and related concepts like plot, genre, and theme (Randall, 1995). Such a model is urgently needed in light of demographic changes in Canadian society that profoundly affect the fabric of life in rural communities. As an expression of the “narrative turn” in the human sciences (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997), the model proposed would acknowledge the distinctive narrative environments and “narrative practices” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998) that can characterize - and problematize - rural life. It would also reflect themes from the “biographical approach” in European adult education (Alheit, Bron-Wojciechowska, Brugger, & Dominicé, 1995) and a range of postmodern perspectives on diversity and power. As well, it would highlight ethical dilemmas (re confidentiality) involved when “outsiders” practice in settings where gossip and rumour abound, or “everyone knows everyone’s business”. In essence, the model would take seriously the narrative complexity of daily life (Randall, 1995; Clews, 2000); the idea of rural communities as stories (Flynn, 1990); and the narrative dimensions of memory (Neisser & Fivush, 1994), identity (McAdams, 1994), and of knowing and learning (Polkinghorne, 1988). By means of qualitative interviews with novice and veteran helpers practicing in different communities throughout New Brunswick (one of the most rural Canadian provinces), plus input from members of those communities themselves, the researchers will incorporate into their model the view of helping as essentially a narrative art, as a matter of “co-authoring” and “restorying” lives (Randall, 1996; Kenyon & Randall, 1997). The model will be sensitive to how, through the storytelling that constitutes daily life in a rural community, there is continual reconstruction of the “community narrative” (Banks & Mangan, 1999) by which its members understand their collective past, present, and future. The model will also focus on how helpers go about “learning the story” in a given community; how they view that story through the lenses of their professional narratives, on the one hand, and of their own life stories, on the other; and how the community's "story" itself is transformed in such a complex hermeneutical process. A key aim in developing such a model is to assist helpers with the challenge of cultivating an anti-oppressive and gender inclusive consciousness in rural settings.

In this session, the researchers will outline the four main stages of their research:
Stage One
A “drawing board stage” occurred from late 1999 to mid-2000 and involved working with a team of five senior undergraduates to map out the pertinent issues and themes relative to “narrative” and “helping”. An extensive literature search was mounted in a range of fields (e.g., sociology, anthropology, gerontology, psychotherapy, history, and literary theory) with a wide variety of keywords (e.g., gossip, rumour, oral history, friendship, rural, genre, secrecy, genealogy).

Stage Two
The researchers will investigate the nature of rural helping, including the interface between formal and informal helping, through semi-structured interviews with 10 informal and 25 formal helpers from a range of disciplines, backgrounds, and communities in New Brunswick. Interviews will also be done with selected members of those communities. Interviewees will be asked about the challenges they encounter in their work and the knowledge and skills they feel is needed to work effectively in rural settings. Attention will be paid to meta-narratives of “rural” that operate among the interviewees.

Stage Three
The researchers will endeavour to construct a model of rural helping based on data obtained from Stage Two, drawing on theoretical perspectives emerging from the social sciences which see the central role played by narrative (or stories) in human knowledge and identity, and in personal and social change.

Stage Four
The researchers will employ a participatory action research model, involving a multi-disciplinary Advisory Committee, to devise first-level and continuing education curricula for rural helping in a variety of fields that is based on a narrative model. In all of four stages, the researchers will draw on their experiences of “teaching story” - that is, introducing students in social work and gerontology to the conceptual potential of the “narrative root metaphor” (Sarbin, 1986). Throughout the presentation, the researchers will invite observations regarding the issues their work is exploring and the model it is proposing. They will welcome input concerning the types of skills, qualities, and values required for effective, ethical helping in rural settings - where storytelling is integral to daily life, disciplinary boundaries are routinely obscured, and professional "expertise" must be continually evaluated in the light of local knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1996). At the same time, input will be sought concerning the applicability of such a model of helping in urban settings as well as rural ones.

References
Clews, R. (2000) Constructing anti-racist social work from the perspectives of ‘other' in a
Canadian rural context: Sensitizing concepts and stories from diverse people - a first chapter. Paper presented at Joint Conference of the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, Montreal, PQ.


