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**Review of *Rural Gays and Lesbians: Building on the Strengths of  
Communities* Edited by James Donald Smith and Ronald J.  
Mancoske**

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**Rural Gays and Lesbians: Building on the Strengths of Communities.**

Edited by James Donald Smith and Ronald J. Mancoske. New York: Haworth Press, 1997. xviii+121 pp. Notes, figures, references, index. \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0-78900-362-7), \$14.95 paper (ISBN 1-56023-106-8).

Rural gay men and lesbians face unique challenges when seeking resources and services in times of need, as do the social workers attempting to offer them aid. Written by and for social services audiences, *Rural Gays and Lesbians* includes articles about these issues, as well as poetry about rural life from the perspective of lesbians and gays. Editors Smith and Mancoske attempt to fill a void in writings about contemporary social work. Unfortunately, the volume's significant weaknesses leave the reader without the understanding of ways to build on community strengths promised in the title.

The most serious of these, a routine use of broad, negative, and consistently unsupported generalizations about rural communities as places gay men and lesbians call home, is evident throughout. One article argues that gay people are targets of discrimination and oppression, *particularly* if they live in rural areas, where "staying unknown and not visible becomes a means of survival . . ." (Smith, 18). Another contends that gay people "are perhaps nowhere more subject to hostility" than in rural communities (Foster, 24). None of the authors provides evidence for these statements. Further, few of

the articles ever consider that gay men or lesbians living in rural communities might be "out"; they take invisibility for granted.

Throughout the volume, attributes used to describe rural communities as detrimental for lesbians and gays might easily be used to argue for the benefits rural life can offer them. Community involvement and strong social norms, for example, are said to be characteristics of rural communities that produce negative feelings about gays and lesbians (Lindhorst). On the other hand, community embeddedness might, in fact, produce new levels of social acceptance and awareness. This notion is supported to some degree in the descriptions of life for gay men in a small Southern town (Whittier).

Several articles outline specific issues unique to rural social work with gay men and lesbians. For the social worker, rural challenges include a limited range of services one can offer and the tendency for rural residents to draw upon informal social support rather than publicly available assistance (Lindhorst). Problems rural gay men and lesbians face include documented evidence of widespread homophobia among social workers themselves, inadequate information among social workers about gay and lesbian issues, and the social isolation of gay persons in small communities (Mancoske). By highlighting such challenges, these articles make an important contribution, though proposals for surmounting them are few. Specific suggestions include directing social workers to examine their values; to recognize that lesbian and gay people, crossing class, racial, and ethnic categories, may therefore have diverse needs and may not be easily identifiable; and to reaffirm their commitment to confidentiality, often of critical importance to this population (Friedman).

*Rural Gays and Lesbians* offers some important insights into the uncommon challenges this population confronts, as well as the difficulties the helping services professionals charged with serving their needs encounter. The concluding poems about rural life for gays and lesbians provide a human, personal dimension to the volume. Nonetheless, while attempting to dismantle oppressive myths and stereotypes to help meet the needs of gay men and lesbians in rural areas, the authors too often support equally damaging stereotypes of rural community life. **Stephen T. Russell**, *Department of Human and Community Development, University of California, Davis*.