OLDER ADULTS' SOCIAL CAPITAL AND GENERATIVE ACTIVITY IN RURAL IRELAND

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For ageing adults, rural areas present challenges to social and psychological well-being that are qualitatively different from those encountered in urban and suburban areas. Because of its importance to well-being, we explored the ways in which older adults in rural Ireland operate on and experience their social environment. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a sample (n = 10) of active older adults living in a sparsely populated, rural, and geographically isolated area of Ireland. Transcripts were thematically analyzed to gain insight into the ways these older adults reciprocally build informal social capital and engage in generative activity. Findings challenge commonplace notions of rural life as socially isolating and lonely for older adults and suggest that these older adults enact valuable roles in their rural community that are important to social and psychological well-being.

Keywords: older adults, rural life, social capital, generativity, well-being

1. Introduction

Population ageing in rural areas has been documented in many countries. In the United States, for example, more than 16.5% of the population in rural communities is age 65 or older, higher than in non-rural areas (Glasgow & Berry, 2013). In Canada, there are similar trends, where about 15% of the rural population is 65 or older, compared to 13% in urban areas (Dandy & Bollman, 2008). Percentages are even higher in Ireland, where 42% of people age 65 or older live in rural areas (Connolly, Finn, & O'Shea, 2012).

Population ageing often follows population migrations (Malmberg, 2008), which may be triggered by severe economic downturns, such as the economic crisis that hit Ireland in 2008. As a result of this crisis, Ireland experienced the largest wave of emigration since the famine years

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of 1845 to 1852 (Gilmartin, 2013), with rural areas experiencing greater levels of emigration than urban areas (Glynn, Kelly, & MacÉinrí, 2013). Recent academic and popular press publications have emphasized the negative effects of emigration on older adults living in rural Irish areas, where poverty, isolation, and loneliness already occur at higher rates, and are associated with physical and mental health problems such as morbidity, mortality, depression, infection and cognitive decline (Burholt & Scharf, 2013; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, & Pitkälä, 2005; Wenger, 2001). It has been suggested that community functioning, traditional family connections, and support structures are undermined by such migration patterns, and that these effects may be particularly detrimental for older adults (Melia & Harkin, 2014; Walsh & O'Shea, 2008; Walsh, O'Shea, Scharf, & Murray, 2012).

However, it is also important to question whether rural environments are universally problematic for older adults. Recent critiques provide a counterbalance to these portraits of older rural adults as passive victims of their environments (e.g., Davis, Crothers, Grant, Young, & Smith, 2012; Keating & Philips, 2008; Rozanova, Dosman, Gierveld, & Keating, 2008). This critical human ecology approach assumes that older adults are active agents with capacity to effect change and adapt to changes in their environments. We adopted this perspective and explored the ways in which older adults in Ireland operate on their environments as active agents, generatively building, protecting, and sustaining social capital. We sought to understand these older adults' experiences of social capital because it is an important facilitator of psychological and social well-being. In the next section, we consider the roles of two forms of social capital, sense of community and neighbouring, in well-being.

2. Social Capital: Sense of Community and Neighbouring

Drawing from Coleman (1988), Perkins and Long (2002, p. 291) defined social capital (SC) as "the norms, networks, and mutual trust of 'civil society' facilitating cooperative action among citizens and institutions". In their specification of the SC construct, Perkins and Long identified four dimensions: sense of community (SOC), neighbouring, collective efficacy, and citizen participation. In their framework, sense of community and neighbouring are defined as informal dimensions of SC, whereas collective efficacy and citizen participation are formally organized dimensions. In the present research we focused on the two informal dimensions of SC, sense of community and neighbouring, as important facilitators of generative occupation and well-being.

SOC encompasses community values, feelings of belonging, mutual concern, need fulfillment, and emotional connection (Brodsky, 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Perkins & Long, 2002). SOC has also been used to refer to social cohesion, social integration and social support (Almedom, 2005), including participation, interpersonal trust, and norms of reciprocity (Kawachi & Berkman, 2000). In past research, SOC predicted less loneliness, more well-being, and more life satisfaction (Davidson & Cotter, 1991; Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, & Fowler, 1996; Prezza & Constantini, 1998).

Neighbouring is "informal mutual assistance and information sharing among neighbours" (Perkins & Long, 2002, p. 295). We assumed that neighbouring, as an informal form of mutual aid, is especially important in isolated rural areas for both instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. First, neighbouring fills in the gaps left by sparse services and community resources; second, neighbouring activities offer potentially generative opportunities. Previous research

demonstrated the importance of neighbouring to older adults' well-being, including cognitive functioning and psychological distress (e.g., Brown et al., 2009).

Some researchers make the argument that older adults' social capital is weaker in rural areas (e.g., Rural Poverty and Inclusion Working Group, 2001; Wenger, 1990), but others suggest that informal social capital, such as social connections, are easier to develop in rural areas (Eales, Keefe, & Keating, 2008; Rozanova et al., 2008). In the present research we aimed to explore older adults' subjective experiences of building and using informal social capital for generative purpose in a rural community in Ireland.

3. Generativity, Old Age, and Well-being

Generativity is "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" but also includes "such more popular synonyms as productivity and creativity" (Erikson, 1950, p. 267). Generative accomplishment satisfies important motives and is associated with psychological health (Stewart & Vandewater, 1998). Although generativity is most often conceptualized as a personal characteristic that adults are motivated to achieve in their older years, generative experiences are anchored in the individual's social ecology, and so generativity can be conceptualized as a psychosocial space that connects a person to her or his social world, arising from both "cultural demand" and "inner desire" (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Thus, generative accomplishment requires both social and cultural resources and individual capacity to utilize those resources.

The importance of generativity to well-being for older adults is well-established in the field of gerontology (Kruse & Schmitt, 2012). For example, for older adults, generativity significantly predicted optimism and satisfaction with life. These findings suggest that the positive consequences of generativity for mental health stretch well beyond middle adulthood into older adulthood and beyond, an assumption that is consistent with McAdams's (2006) scholarship. In the present research, we sought to explore generative opportunities and generative accomplishment amongst a group of older adults within a rural community in Ireland. We asked: what opportunities for generativity are available in the rural social ecology for older adults? Do these older adults' social activities create opportunities for generative accomplishment? How might these generativity experiences be important to older adults' subjective well-being?

4. The Present Research

We report a case study of a small group of older adults living in one rural community in Ireland. Our aim was to examine the way these older adults operate on their rural social environment to build and sustain informal social capital and to pursue generative activities. We adopted the definition of "community" as a grouping of people in a shared location (Obst & White, 2005). We paid attention to participants' community involvement, interactions with others, perceptions of trust, and daily activities. Our aim was not to make empirical generalizations about the extent to which social capital exists in rural areas or to make claims about the average level of generativity amongst the aged rural population. Rather, our aim was to expand and complement existing literature on social capital and generativity by furthering our

understanding of older adults' subjective experiences of and interactions with their rural social environment.

5. Method

5.1 Case Study Setting

Participants were members of one community in Ireland, classified as "rural" by the Organization for Economic Co-operation (OECD, 1998). Participants' homes were scattered over a wide area within the rural setting, but they were united geographically by their proximity to one particular village (all lived within a fifteen mile radius), which served as the focal point of social connection for each of them. The village is located in a peripheral area on the west coast of Ireland, an area that is described as having "marginal soils, limited topography, a large number of smallholdings, weak urban structure, relatively poor communication structures and continuing outmigration to national and international centers" (West Cork Development Partnership [WCDP], 2012, p. 26). At the same time, this village is situated in a recognized area of outstanding natural beauty, perched on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, with numerous protected areas of conservation including one of the largest sessile oak woodlands in Ireland (WCDP, 2012).

The permanent residents of this community number approximately 800, but because of tourism, the population swells in summertime. Despite its popularity as a tourist destination, public transport is sparse and underdeveloped. Residents rely on cars to access public services and shops (WCDP, 2012). The village has one main street with one gas station, one grocery shop, one police station, numerous pubs and restaurants, two hotels, and seasonal tourist shops. There is also one Catholic Church and one village hall, both located at one end of the main street. The year-round population is homogenous in terms of ethnicity and religion; virtually everyone is White and identifies as Catholic.

5.2 Participants

The sample consisted of six women and four men, with ages ranging from 65 to 82. Seven participants were lifelong community members. One participant was originally from another region of Ireland and two were from another country, but all had lived within this rural Irish community for 10 to 30 years. All participants were retired. Eight participants lived alone, and were either widowed or single. Three of the ten participants did not drive. The participants' previous occupations were diverse. Two had been gardeners, one had been a boatman, two were retired nurses, four had been housewives and one had been a builder. All of the participants were White. Participants were not asked to identify their religious affiliation, and so religious identification is explicitly known only for participants who made reference to Catholic religious beliefs and activities, such as attending mass.

5.3 Procedures

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, a method that is useful when researchers seek samples with very specific characteristics (Howitt & Cramer, 2011). Six participants were recruited through direct contact from the first author. The first author also initiated contact with members of her social network who knew potential participants. These individuals made the initial contacts with other potential participants, explained the research to them, and provided them with the first author's contact details. Four participants were recruited through this method.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between thirty minutes and two hours. All participants gave informed consent, including permission to digitally record the interview. Eight interviews were conducted in participants' homes, while two were conducted in a shared public space of participants' choosing. Interviews began with the first author's description of her lifelong ties to the local community and proceeded in a flexible manner with direction taken from participants. Questions were derived from quantitative measures of generativity, social capital, and psychological sense of community (Chen, Staunton, Gong, Fang, & Li, 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McAdams & de St Aubin, 1992). Questions explored participants' experiences of being a member of their community, activities, who they saw and felt connected to, how much they trusted their community and what their community means to them. Each interview ended with questions about participants' satisfaction with life.

5.4 Data Management and Data Analysis

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis for managing, coding and analyzing our data corpus. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author. Through verbatim transcription the first author became familiar with the data and developed preliminary ideas about coding categories. Once transcription was completed, preliminary coding began in earnest. Most coded data was identified through a deductive or 'top down', theory-driven process guided by the authors' research questions and interests in key concepts related directly or indirectly to sense of community, neighbouring, social support, generativity, and well-being. For example, lower order codes were generated for all references to trust, community, and belonging, which were then received the higher order code "sense of community". This deductive approach to coding was combined with an inductive approach that allowed the authors to identify interesting features of the data that would have been otherwise excluded from analysis. For example, participants' talk about solitary activities, particularly gardening and television (which will be explored further down), was identified as interesting features of the data through inductive coding procedures. Once the first author decided a set of preliminary set of codes, the codes and transcripts were discussed between the first and second author who compared coded transcript excerpts to review and refine the codes until they achieved consensus. At that point the first author began the process of deriving preliminary themes from the transcripts.

We adopted a contextual approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our aim was to identify themes that described participants' experiences, meanings and realities, as well as to examine how the broader social context shaped participants' realities. Most themes were identified deductively through our interest in informal social capital, generativity, and well-

being. We applied a contextualist method of analysis so that both the explicit (semantic) and latent meanings were taken into account, which allowed us to examine the underlying ideas and assumptions linked to the socio-cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was applied because the contextual setting was relevant to participants' subjective experiences of their rural social ecology.

"Grounding in examples" is essential to good qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999, p. 220) as such the analysis follows this approach. Punctuation has been added to extracts to aid comprehension. Square brackets [ ] indicate excluded material, and words were inserted in brackets to improve clarity. Interviewees are identified with pseudonyms.

We make no claims about the representativeness of the sample's demographic characteristics, such as social class or education, nor do we suggest these findings are generalizable to other rural populations. Our goal was to complement and extend existing previous research and to pay close attention to subjective experiences of social capital and generativity in this particular context (Connolly, Finn, & O'Shea, 2012).

6. Results

6.1 Co-construction of Social Capital: Sense of Community and Neighbouring

Visibility and recognition. All participants talked about the importance of being recognized by others and being able to recognize others in their community. Participants felt well known and had extensive knowledge of others. The sparsely populated context heightened visibility of self and others, including outsiders. This type of recognition is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for subjective sense of belonging, which is an important component of SOC (Perkins & Long, 2002). Mutual recognition was talked about as a resource that facilitated community trust, social support, and mutual aid. Recognition was an important corollary to generative activities like caring for and looking out for others.

> *Extract 1.* Irene: Because when you work in the hospital for ten years in [the local town] you know granny and you know the children and you know daddy and you know them all, they come through your hands like, so they don't forget you.

Irene went on to explain how just being "in the country" meant that people knew each other:

> Well it being [] the country, people know each other, that's it, everyone knows each other's business so now you couldn't do a lot of things out of the way, when everyone knows your business can you?

Fiona described how people knew her business and movements based on recognizing her car and knowing her daily routine; in reference to herself she stated: *"wherever [her] car is parked, she's there"*. Fiona explained how her visibility signaled to others that she is okay:

Extract 2. Fiona: [My friend] was down now on Sunday,[ ] and she hadn't seen me 'cause she was in here a couple of times [here, refers to a public space that the participant frequented], and she was wondering was I sick or anything.

Community members' familiarity with one another's activities meant that anything out of the ordinary could easily be interpreted as a potential threat. In this way, high community visibility facilitates the mutual concern dimension of sense of community (Perkins & Long, 2002). Area-based social cohesion and informal social control has been identified as important to older adults' "physical safety, emotional security and well-being" (Almedom, 2005, p. 949). Visibility was important to community norms, to trust, and to neighbouring activities. All participants described their community as trustworthy, and visibility was credited with contributing to community trust.

Extract 3. Geoff: In a way you can very easily see how things are within the community, it's a bit clear, there is a clarity here, what you don't find in societies that are dense, if something happens here, then everybody knows about it.

For older adults in this context, visibility appeared to satisfy safety concerns and to serve as important resource for community trust. A common thread that ran across the interviews was trust in their ability to identify "strange cars" and its importance to community safety. Jane said:

Extract 4. If I saw a strange car passing I would be wondering who it was and where it went, you see now like that, [ ], you would, because you would know all of the cars and you would know who would be going where and going this way [name of person's] son would be going this way and the mother would be going this way, but if I saw a strange car going past there I would be saying who's that, and where is it going?

All participants lived miles away from the local village, where the police station is located. As described by Eimear, there is a very minimal police presence in their community: *"well we don't see much of the [police] or anything, you know, around the place or anything"*. In the context of low policing, visibility and mutual recognition are valued resources for these older residents. Participants talked about the ability to easily discern between known and unknown as contributing to a sense of control over their environment. They also talked about their own sense of responsibility and of feeling empowered to take action. As Caoimhe said, *"if I see anything that I think is suspicious, I just take the number and call it through, the lads [police] take care of it in the barracks"*. From an outside perspective, this behaviour may seem like excessive social control, but from participants' perspectives, it is empowering and fosters a sense of safety and security. This is important because feeling secure and having trust in others may contribute to participants' general sense of well-being (Almedom, 2005; Curry & Fisher, 2012; Lindstrom, Merlo, & Ostergren, 2003).

Neighbouring. Participants' involvement and interaction with other older community members facilitated neighbouring in the form of instrumental mutual aid, such as resource sharing. Being able to drive is an important source of social interaction, both for the driver and for other members of the community. Six participants who still drive spoke about taking others

to activities such as bingo sessions, mass, or to the local town for shopping. These activities build and sustain psychological sense of community. They are also opportunities for generative activity. Neighbouring in the form of generative social support and mutual aid are linked with visibility because they are both contingent on an awareness of other people's needs. Aine explained:

> *Extract 5.* My neighbour I suppose is 90 [years old] last week and whenever she wants to go I bring her to mass [ ], we go sometimes to [town] maybe once a week and whatever, we have lunch and do some shopping.

Similarly, Caoimhe explained how she takes her neighbour to bingo. The neighbour loves bingo, but does not have a car. *"I play, I have to take [name] because she doesn't have a car, and none of the family are around at that time.* Jane explained how her husband (Jane does not drive) would bring others to the active retirement group that was being run in the village hall:

> *Extract 6.* And then there are two more ladies back there and they come, [ ], they come to the meetings, but they have no transport so [husband], took over going for them two and bringing them home again. We just go down, and west over.

Knowing other older members of the community fosters the type of civic engagement and social connectedness that Putnam (1995) argued is in decline. Here, the rural setting, accountability norms, and community resources combine to enable mutual aid. These findings demonstrate that older persons have capacity to be proactive and interdependent members of their community, and not inevitably passive victims of isolating geography and declining communities.

The surprisingly peripheral role of family. Interestingly, family did not seem to be an important source of social support, either instrumental or emotional. Participants mentioned family rarely or not at all; when they did, they seemed to be peripheral to participants' everyday lives and activities. None of the participants – even those who had family members living near them – mentioned family members' involvement in their activities of daily living or as sources of social support. When participants did mention their family members, they were described as too busy to help out; not as criticism, but rather as a matter of fact. For example, Grainne described how she relies on her (also ageing) neighbour for a lift:

> *Extract 7.* I: Is he the only one that you would rely on for a lift?
> G: That's all really because there is nobody else. I mean [son's name], sure he is working day and night. [Son and daughter-in-law] have four kids to look after, you can't ask.

Although we do not claim that participants' ties to their children and other relatives are weak, we did not obtain any evidence that they rely on or turn to family to fulfill their social or material needs. Nor did we obtain any evidence that the relative absence of familial support from participants' everyday lives was detrimental to their well-being, which is a concern raised previously about older adults living in rural areas (e.g., Melia & Harkin, 2014; Walsh, O'Shea, Scharf, & Murray, 2012). Indeed, it may be that the relatively peripheral role played by family

members enhanced opportunities for mutual aid and greater social connectedness amongst these older community members.

Indeed, sense of community amongst older adults in rural areas appears to be important to neighbouring activities, which are often of a generative nature. In the next section we describe a range of generative activities that participants engage with, as evidenced in their accounts of communal helping and doing for others. We also describe their individual, or solitary, generative pursuits, with a focus on gardening, which was a particularly strong theme across the data corpus.

6.2 Generative Activities

Communal generative pursuits. Participants described volunteer activities such as helping others, volunteering for local groups, helping tourists to trace their Irish heritage and to explore the outdoors. The generative nature of these activities for participants was evident. For example, Eimear talked about volunteering this way:

> *Extract 8.* We collect for cancer and heart foundation you know [ ], I think that the heart foundation and the cancer [charities] are vital, we all, it affects us all in some way or another… someone is always touched by them aren't they?

By volunteering, Eimear was able to care for others. Fiona demonstrated care for others through her weekly routine of *"visiting my neighbour, who is an old lady that lives on her own, so I call to her every Saturday [ ] so we have a hot toddy and sweet cake"*.

Iain described how through his passion for genealogy he helps others locate their ancestors' old dwelling places:

> *Extract 9.* A lot of people I help are people that they are their relatives, that people come from abroad, genealogy and that I can help them with that [ ] and I have done it you know, people that have come from America and from overseas, they love to see the old house that they came from and all that, and they may be third or fourth generation you know.

Through legacies of care and commitment, people pass on some aspect of themselves to future generations, and contribute to collective continuity (McAdams, 2006), which previous research indicated are associated with well-being, health and longevity (Post, 2005; Sani et al., 2007). It is worth noting that such activities are not simply a result of informal social capital; these generative activities may also dynamically contribute to the wider community by building and maintaining trust and social cohesion, which, in turn, may also lay an important foundation for further generative pursuits.

Not all of the participants' activities were social, of course; participants also described their solitary activities. We have chosen to include two contrasting solitary activities in our analysis: gardening and television viewing. Gardening was a recurrent theme across most interviews, and we include it here because we believe it to be an important source of generative accomplishment available to older adults living in this rural context and climate. In contrast, television emerged as a curious theme in our analysis by virtue of its virtual absence from most participants'

descriptions of their everyday activities. We include television in the final section in order to contrast participants' disregard for this passive and non-generative pastime (which is often held up by critics as a source of community decline) to their enthusiasm for generative social and solitary activity.

Gardening. Gardening has been conceptualized as creating meaning through 'caring, productivity and stewardship' (Heliker, Chadwick, & O'Connell, 2001, p. 38). Harriet described how she loved where she lived because it enabled her to enjoy nature and gardening *"nature and gardening would probably be my two biggest things [ ] I grew my peas and my lettuce or whatever, and I have flowers growing"*. Jane stated *"I love to be out and a bit of gardening [ ] I love it"*. These are just two extracts of many that indicated the importance participants placed on gardening activities. Interviewees gave different reasons for why they loved gardening. Greg stated:

> *Extract 10.* From every season you have something, [ ] the spring is just full of blossoms [ ] and then slowly you go into summer and then fruit is ripening and then you come into autumn and you see the immense deep colours from the plants you have planted, and then you come into winter and you go into hibernation in a way if you can. [ ] that's the cycle that you create in your life when you create a place where your food comes from, and what happens then as well is that if you know what to feed the soil, and knowing how you feed the soil, the plants will take up and give back to you , then you know it's a winner.

This extract demonstrates the deep connection participants felt to their environment and the pleasures that come from nurturing soil and plants. Gardening was described as an extension of the self, an expression of personal identity and integrity. Jane said:

> *Extract 11.* Well I think that's, well if you haven't outside the house nice, my mother used to say that long ago, that if someone would come along to the house and if outside is untidy, they say what's inside like, you say what's it like inside there.

From this extract, it is apparent that for Jane, her garden made a statement to others about who she is, that she upholds certain personal values that have been passed down to her from her mother, and which she feels is important to continue, not only to demonstrate her good standing in the community, but also to set good examples for others.

Generativity refers to facilitation of well-being through social interaction, but it also refers to the pleasure and satisfaction derived from solitary occupation. Moreover, there is an ecological dimension to gardening as a form of generativity. Having a garden is dependent on having the space to put it, and space is obviously not an issue in rural areas. In this way, rural areas may facilitate gardening, and gardening may contribute to generativity and, therefore, well-being.

Participants' enjoyment of gardening had both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. Beautiful gardens elicit praise from observers and signals one's good standing in the community. Gardening is also a generative activity that quite literally causes the continuation of one generation (of plants and people) after another. Whether extrinsically or intrinsically motivated, the activities of gardening are recognized as beneficial to well-being for those who engage in the

practice (Heliker, Chadwick, & O'Connell, 2001; van Den Berg & Custers, 2010) and a place where people can construct, cultivate, and communicate valued aspects of their self and identity to the outside world (Ouellette, 2012). Additionally, participants described their gardening activities as if they were a source of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), a sense of feeling fully immersed in a challenging and creative activity. Gardening might be one activity that remains both challenging and feasible at their age and health status, and thus generates well-being because it generates "flow."

6.3 Disregard for Passive Activity

A common stereotype of older people is that of the lone, sedentary senior citizen who compensates for the loss of social and productive activity with increasing levels of television viewing (van der Goot, Beentjes, & van Selm, 2015). Consistent with research such as that by van der Goot and colleagues, our findings challenge this stereotype and illustrate the ways in participants in our study communicated indifference or even disdain for passive pastimes such as television viewing. Television stood out in stark contrast to the varied social and solitary generative activities that our participants described, mostly by virtue of its absence from participants' talk. Only three participants even mentioned television, and in each case, they mentioned it in order to make the point that they do not watch it. Jane said, *"I never go in there to watch television, I have the wireless here and I have the wireless all night and that's it [I] never goes near TV, never, never, never".* Of course, Jane's expressed disdain for television may simply reflect her understanding of too much television as socially undesirable. Her comment may also be interpreted as "the lady doth protest too much", as an indicator that a life of television viewing represents a feared future alternative for Jane.

Nevertheless, the point we want to make is that, rather than whiling away their later years as isolated and passive consumers of television shows, these older adults living in rural Ireland appear to be actively, and proactively, engaged in their communities, seeking and creating generative opportunities, and building informal social capital. They are interdependently self-reliant and connected to the physical and social aspects of their communities, engaged in activities that are quite incompatible with the television lifestyle Putnam (1995) criticized for causing the individualization of leisure time and eroding sources of social capital.

7. Discussion

We examined the subjective experiences of ten older adults living in one rural community in Ireland. Through thematic analysis we identified some of the ways in which these older adults co-construct informal social capital (sense of community and neighbouring) and the importance of these forms of social capital to generative accomplishment. Along with other recent research on this topic (Walsh & O'Shea, 2008), our findings challenge prevailing concerns about weakening social capital, loneliness, isolation, and alienation amongst the rural older population (Joseph & Cloutier-Fisher, 2005) and question the extent to which rural living is bad for older people's health. Our findings are consistent with the critical gerontology approach of scholars such as Keating (2008), whose edited volume demonstrated the various ways in which rural

areas are good places to grow old. In the following paragraphs, we draw out key findings from our study to illustrate how the older adults in our rural Irish setting actively operate on their environment to make it a good place to grow old.

One key finding from our study is that, although social capital can be conceptualized as a characteristic of a community or society, it is individual community members that construct and mobilize social capital through their interactions with one another. Our participants' accounts described how they created and sustained informal social capital through mutual aid, informal social control, and area-based social cohesion. Our findings echo earlier research that illustrated how older adults in rural areas actively construct social networks, the importance of these networks for feelings of security, safety, and well-being (Almedom, 2005; Wenger & Keating, 2008). Indeed, the majority of the participants in the present study reported feeling satisfied with their life and their current situation.

Different forms of social capital may be particularly relevant to people at different life stages. It is clear that for these older adults, being visible, familiar, and aware of one another were sources of sense of community and social well-being. However, other research suggested that for some, social ties of this kind can bind; that they may in fact inhibit individual freedom and negatively affect well-being (Almedom, 2005). It could be that the visibility norms that engender positive sense of community for older residents may be simultaneously experienced as unduly oppressive, and engender negative sense of community, for younger residents (Brodsky, O' Campo, & Aronson, 1999). It would be interesting to examine younger generations' experiences of rural life, the effects of rural life on their social and personal well-being, and whether there are inherent tensions between the factors that promote positive sense of community for older adults and for adolescents and young adults who live in sparsely populated, remote, and rural areas.

Second, it seems that, at least for some older adults, the rural setting may nurture both social connectedness and community involvement. In this case study, a sparsely populated rural setting made it easier to recognize others and to know who needs help, which facilitated help-giving roles and responsibilities. These findings remind us how "underpopulated settings" (Barker & Gump, 1964) can actually be a community resource, in that they are associated with greater levels of community involvement by community members. When underpopulation occurs, individuals feel more responsible for taking up roles that they might otherwise have passed on to others (Shinn & Toohey, 2003).

Conversely, underpopulated settings may pressure older adults to take on too many roles, or roles that make them feel uncomfortable (Shinn & Toohey, 2003). Although some older members of rural communities may feel pressured to take on unwanted roles, or roles for which they do not feel prepared, our findings indicate that they our participants did not experience these roles as overwhelming or stressful. In fact, all participants described neighbouring activities as important and pleasurable. Neighbouring is generative in the sense that it is productive and demonstrates care and commitment. Our participants' generative activities were not directed explicitly at promoting the well-being of future generations (McAdams, 2006), but rather toward collective continuity, supporting the claim that generativity might reflect the "age structure of society and normative developmental expectations" (Kruse & Schmitt, 2012, p. 4).

Although we are not making claims about causality, our third key finding is that rural life in this Irish community fostered opportunities to provide social support to other older adults, which is a resource for generative accomplishment and well-being. Compassion and social support have a positive effect on recipients' health (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), and they are also associated with positive mental health for the providers of such types of support (Post,

2005). Our participants talked about these experiences as satisfying and fulfilling, which is consistent with previous findings that ageing in rural areas offers opportunities for older people to be active volunteers and social entrepreneurs (Glasgow, 2013).

8. Limitations

There are some limitations to the conclusions we should draw about ageing in place in rural areas. First, our sample of older adults living in a rural and isolated area of Ireland is particular and so generalization beyond this sample and context is not warranted. However, representativeness and generalization were not our intention. Rather, our aim was to gain understanding of these older adults' subjective experiences of and responses to their rural social environment. Our sample is small because after the tenth interview was completed, we felt that had reached saturation because no new insights arose from additional information (Bryman, 2008).

As with all non-experimental research, we cannot and should not draw conclusions about causality or directionality from our findings. We began our research from the assumption that informal social capital, in the form of sense of community and neighbouring, combine to create generative opportunities that contribute to quality of life. It is possible, however, that quality of life actually leads individuals to engage deeply and meaningfully with their communities and neighbours, as it is also possible that the two processes are orthogonal to one another. To address and confidently answer questions about covariance, causality, and directionality would require additional research using experimental methods.

Third, our participants were socially well-connected and active. Their experiences are probably not representative of less well-connected members of their community. Were we able to access more geographically and socially isolated participants, we might have found stronger support for claims that older people in rural Ireland are lonely and depressed. However, it is important to identify the ways in which older adults do work within the ecology of rural communities to mobilize, sustain, and utilize social capital for community and social well-being, and we believe our research makes this contribution.

Fourth, our participants had no major physical or mental disabilities and none were over the age of 82. Neither the experiences of the very old nor the very frail were included in this study. If our sample had been older or frailer, we may have obtained more evidence of challenges posed by the rural environment. As our participants age and are less able to drive, their risk for isolation may increase, and generative activities like volunteering, mutual aid, and gardening may become too difficult. As the need to receive aid surpasses the need to provide it, the ability to look back on generative accomplishments may finally overtake generative activities in importance to well-being (Erikson & Erikson, 1998).

Another potential limitation arose from the fact that, as described earlier, the first author is a lifelong member of this community. This might have affected the ways in which participants chose to answer the interview questions. For example, participants may have been more reluctant to share private information, or been more motivated to provide socially desirable responses to interview questions to someone they might reasonably expect to see again. On the other hand, insider status can also create a level of trust that is not always afforded to outsiders in tightly knit communities (Yakushko, Badiee, Mallory, & Wang, 2011).

Despite these limitations, our findings emphasize how important it is for researchers to question assumptions about groups, settings, and contexts (Hughes, Seidman, & Williams, 1993; Shinn & Toohey, 2003). We focused on strengths rather than deficits to understand how older people engage with one another in rural communities to create, sustain, and use social capital, and by doing so, build community through caring, compassionate, and productive activities. Further, our findings indicate that older adults are active co-creators of community, and even suggest that this rural community thrives, at least in part, through older adults' interactions and connections with one another.

9. Implications

We think our findings have some practical implications. Older adults, rather than passive victims of rural, isolating environments, are proactive agents and important community resources. For example, it seems like these residents welcome opportunities for civic engagement. They provide one another with much needed supports, including tangible services such as transportation and mutual aid. Their civic engagement fosters an atmosphere of trust and safety through their watchfulness and familiarity with the community. These activities benefit community members of all ages. It seems older adults are a community resource for government, and perhaps government policy should be to invest in programmes that foster and expand opportunities for older adults' civic engagement At the same time, the effectiveness with which these older adults fill gaps in social services may have a darker side because, if the community's needs are met through older adults' mutual aid and civic engagement, then there is less justification for investing in infrastructure such as public transportation.

In recent years, public service campaigns have raised awareness about the dangers of isolation and loneliness for older adults. These dangers are certainly real, and increased public awareness about them is important. Our findings highlight the fact that not all older adults in rural communities are in need of some sort of intervention to stave off loneliness, isolation, or depression. Interventions targeted toward older adults could be improved or enhanced by capitalizing on the contributions they make to the community in the form of sense of community and neighbouring. Finally, these findings suggest that, at least for some healthy older adults, rather than being hazardous to mental health, rural living may actually benefit well-being.

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