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A Narrative of Emplacement: An Exploration of the Experience of Ageing in Place for Older Rural Men

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Introduction

Contemporary research on aging has tended to focus more on the lives of older women and while research into men's health is undertaken, the broader social, cultural and economic aspects at play in men's lives have largely been ignored. As the period spent in retirement continues to grow in significance due to the increase in longevity, exploring the experience of retirement among a small group of older rural men was the broad aim of a larger study from which this paper is drawn. The former was undertaken as a contribution to the limited literature of how older men experience retirement in a rural area.

The paper begins with a brief description of the main influences prompting the research and includes a discussion on the power of language in terms of ageing theories and the stereotyping of older people. A description of the method of approach will be next, followed by the findings, presented in a narrative format.

As the findings of the original study were presented under three overarching themes below and bearing in mind the title of this paper,- an *exploration of the experience of*

ageing in place for older rural men, the discussion here will limit itself mainly to the emplacement narrative, still mindful how all themes are inextricably linked.

Overarching Themes

- A Narrative of Emplacement
- A Narrative of Affiliation
- A Narrative of Positive Ageing

Drawing on Chapman's (2009:28) work on the concept of emplacement, which focused on 'humans physical interrelationships with physical contexts blurred with socio-cultural and temporal dimensions,' this study too hopes to capture the essence of the experience of emplacement in a rural context for a small group of retired Irish farmers.

Research Influences

Older Rural Men

Similar to most European countries, Ireland's population is ageing with 11% categorised as being aged 65 & over at the last census. However 18.6% of all rural residents were in the same age cohort suggesting the need for research about the needs and challenges of growing older in rural areas specifically (Central Statistics Office, 2006).

Loneliness and depression in men commonly goes unseen, especially if living alone and lack of involvement with formal organisations or even family and friends has been a major cause of disadvantage for men's well-being in later life. Many day centres are dominated by older women and designed more for their needs and are less attractive to men as a result, but what is evident from recent research is the preference of older men for male support and friendship in retirement.

Increasingly, ageing in place is emphasized as the preferred alternative to institutional care. Living independently in rural communities in old age requires not only access to social and health services, but also the support of family,

friends and the wider community. Unlike rural women, many rural Irish men become almost invisible following retirement; Ireland's President Mary McAleese has highlighted this worrying phenomenon while performing her public engagements too and has suggested initiatives to address it with the cooperation of the GAA¹ and IFA².

The power of language

Numerous Ageing theories promote an almost 'ideal' way to age: successful ageing, positive ageing, healthy ageing; active ageing, ageing-well for example. By using such terminology in both policy and academic discourses, Chapman (2005) and others argue that these are potentially offensive concepts which suggest that some people 'age poorly', regarding aging as a personal failure.

Using a single age band of '65 & over' fails to recognize the heterogeneity of the older population whose individual needs change with advancing years. If profiles of the different age-bands of older people are not readily available, research carried out on behalf of the National Council for Ageing and Older People (NCAOP) question the ability of the policy-makers to cater for older peoples' needs in an equitable manner (O'Shea and Conboy, 2005). The authors acknowledge that while further data may be available by special request, they argue that the main datasets on all sectors of the population should include information on the older population in the same detail as every other age cohort (Ibid).

In the developed world at least, youthfulness and fitness merit a high cultural valuation and fuelled by mass media, globalisation and in some academic disciplines, an anti-aging agenda continues to be promoted. Andrews (1999:301) challenges the adoption of the terminology of 'agelessness'; by asserting that the concept of agelessness is itself a form of ageism. Furthermore, she argues such a

¹ The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is a long standing amateur national and international sporting organisation focused primarily on promoting Gaelic games such as hurling, football and handball. It also promotes Irish Culture including music, dance and the Irish language.

² The Irish Farmers Association is a national organisation to represent the interests of all farming sectors in the Republic of Ireland

concept deprives the old of 'one of their most hard-earned resources: their age' (Ibid).

Other common terminology in ageing discourse such as dependency/dependent go hand in hand with pensions and health care provision policies, which according to Vincent (2003) portray older people as a demographic time bomb.

Methodology

Until relatively recently, ageing research has been mostly prescriptive in approach in terms of identifying needs and resources for older people, whereas contemporary ageing-well research has begun to 'describe rather than prescribe how people are ageing' (Chapman 2009). In line with Chapman's view, a descriptive perspective was deemed most appropriate for this exploratory study also.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The research was located within the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology as informed by Martin Heidegger and others, as adopting this approach enabled exploration of the life world of the participants as explained below. Primarily concerned with human experience, on a continuum, 'pure' phenomenological research as advanced by Husserl and others, seeks to begin from a perspective free of preconceptions or hypotheses (Denscombe, 2007:77). The purpose of phenomenological questioning is to seek meaning and significance but it cannot claim to solve problems nor allow for empirical generalisations (van Manen, 1997:23). According to Denscombe (2007:85) phenomenology is a 'humanistic style of research with an inbuilt respect for people'. This and its suitability to small scale research with limited resources were important factors before beginning this research.

Lived experience is the 'starting point and end point of phenomenological research' according to van Manen (1997:36) whose aim is to transform the lived experience into a 'textual expression of its essence'; such texts can take several forms, including tapes, transcripts, photographs, art and culture (ibid). Tapes,

transcripts, photographs and field notes were all regarded as textual material in this case.

In addition to phenomenology an interpretive research paradigm was also required. Crotty, (1998) suggests that hermeneutics adds the interpretive element needed to 'explicate meanings and assumptions' in texts that even the participants' may find difficult to articulate themselves.

Methods

Methods of data collection included one focus group and individual semi-structured face to face interviews which were taped and transcribed word for word; the interview schedule was piloted beforehand, needing only minor adjustment. The final stage in the analysis was informed by van Manen's(1997) *selective* approach to textual analysis which involves uncovering and then isolating thematic aspects of a text.

By becoming immersed in the texts, sub-themes emerge. By reengaging and repeatedly working with the text, four or five overarching themes were finally isolated which best captured essences of the experience or even showed phenomena in a new way (Crotty, 1998).

The Sample and Gaining Access

Sampling was purposive for this study. Internet searches led to the identification of several active retirement groups but membership was overwhelmingly female. An independent all male retirement group in existence for over a decade in a small rural village in Munster was approached in March 2010. Initial contact was by telephone, followed by two visits by the researcher to the group members to explain the purpose of the research and to invite them to participate; a detailed information brief was also provided which clarified both participants and researcher's roles in the process.

Consent forms were signed in April and field work was completed by early July. The focus group discussion and interviews were held at the participant's regular venue which was a familiar setting for them and also afforded complete privacy.

Both of these factors were important ethically to ensure the safety of the participants through their engagement with the research process.

As previous occupations were not formally disclosed prior to interview, that the eight participants had previously been engaged in farming is coincidental, but hardly surprising, as agriculture would have been the main source of employment in this geographic area until fairly recently. So although the study did not set out to interview farmers specifically, it resulted in a unique opportunity to investigate how a microcosm of this social group experience their day to day lives as retired men; - men whose voices generally go unheard in Ireland.

Participant Profile

- Participants were aged between 68 and 84 years, with an average age of 76.5 at the time of the interviews; 5 lived with spouses, 1 was unmarried and lived with a sibling and two widowers lived alone.
- Six of the eight men continue to live on their farms, even though their land is now leased or rented, while two live in a nearby town.
- All were in reasonable health; all were car drivers relying primarily on their own transport.
- Some retired in their 70's; others took early retirement; several retired for health reasons, others due to the increase in regulations in farming.
- When asked about their experience of retirement, positive views for the most part were reported but two who were forced to retire in their 50's due to serious health issues were far less positive.
- As a group they appreciate new opportunities to travel together, to pursue hobbies and new interests. However, it was acknowledged that a period of adjustment following retirement was also part of the process.

As stated previously, *emplacement* is the overarching theme being addressed in this paper and sub-themes include: ageing in place; attachment to place; custodians of the land; intergenerational relationships and affiliation and belonging.

Findings

Comments are from across the continuum and names have been changed in the interests of anonymity. The main topic in the focus group was 'retirement' which inevitably included a discussion on ageing. A comment by one participant highlights his own generation's approach to ageing as opposed to that of his parent's when he said: *I think there are more people, more positive than there used to be. I remember when I was young...older people had very little to do...you see transport was non-existent and there seemed to be old people, em, (pause) **kind of fading away, - and that day is gone now"** (Bob)*

The prospect of fading away is probably a fear harboured by most people, from mid-life anyway. This quote is useful to place 76 year old Bob's positive attitude to ageing in context; he does not envisage himself fading away, as he say's 'that day is gone now'. It is suggested then, that his experience of ageing in a place where he has spent his entire life has contributed to this positive outlook; a perspective shared by all of the by the participants.

Ageing in Place

Ageing in place means more than remaining in one's home; it also includes the physical environment of neighbourhood, community, social affiliations and networks. Social networks developed across the life course are sometimes described as the 'convoy model of social relations' which accumulate over a lifetime, providing tangible and emotional support between people. (Ajrouch et al., 2007, Keating 2008) Functionally, Black (2008: 81,82) describes ageing in place as the 'fit between the person and their residential setting' which should include supports that maintain that fit. If to age well then, is to age locally, it is important to find 'mutually compatible ways' for ageing according to Chapman (2009).

All of this study's participants continue to live either on, or within a few miles of their farms and when asked whether retiring elsewhere was ever considered, all replies were negative. .

When asked 'to what extent is the local area and community important to you' six of the eight participants described it as being either very or extremely important: *My own local area is extremely important to me; a lot of my school friends emigrated in the late 40's and early 50's and I think it would have broken my heart if I had to emigrate...my relationships with my neighbours are extremely important to me.* (Bob)

Oh, very important –this is very, very important to me; in fact I never want to go anywhere, only locally. I drive very little now, but I have a lot of great friends and we meet and have chats (Seamus).

In contrast, participants who were forced to retire early due to health problems appeared less positive in terms of growing older in their communities. The growing mechanisation of farming, the noticeable reduction in family farms along with the number of younger people 'leaving the land' was described by one man as his area being 'closed down', illuminating a sense of loss and nostalgia for a former way of life which supported a populated countryside.

Attachment to Place

Attachment to place is well documented and ample evidence of the synergy between attachment to place and ageing in place was found in this study. As a concept, place attachment is multifaceted and complex and in light of the historical significance of agriculture and farming in Irish society, very little research has been done in the Irish context. As contemporary farming practices are largely mechanised, the present cohort of retired farmers may be the last generation uniquely placed to relate the lived experience of a way of life which is such an important part of rural Ireland's social history.

For the farmers in this study, 'home' as a concept extends to familiar landscapes as well, supporting Casey's (2001:689) argument that landscape is indeed a 'cusp concept', serving to 'distinguish space and place'. An Australian

study by Guillifer and Thomson (2006: 91) suggests that farmers develop an emotional attachment to the land throughout their lives, acting as a source of 'identity, refuge and comfort' in old age .

The following comment mirrors these sentiments well: *I have the freedom of the world. I can go out in the morning and maybe see no one all day and it doesn't bother me. I can spend my day down there doing nothing and there'll be no one bothering me. If I lived somewhere where you couldn't go out the back door, without someone looking down your neck...that wouldn't appeal to me at all. I never liked cities...no country for me!* (Matt)

Examples like this also challenge the assumption that living alone in a rural area inevitably correlates with loneliness or isolation (Matt experiences solitude as freedom); it also suggests a resilience and independence, not commonly associated with older people generally, in popular media.

Custodians of the Land

Many Irish farmers do not regard themselves as owners (per se) of their farms, but rather as custodians for future generations and breaking the chain of inheritance can be difficult for someone like Mike who seems frustrated that he might have been the last generation of his family to farm: *My own lads, none of them wanted to stay at home...but if things was better...- that someone would be still farming...there was a good living at home and I think they have destroyed a great thing, they have wiped it away...and for some of the geniuses that write up some of the things for agriculture and farming, they killed it, they killed it.*

In comparison, the following comment by a farmer in his eighties suggests a certain satisfaction in having fulfilled his duty in handing on the family farm when he said: *I've been farming all my life and never had a wish to do anything other than farming...I've been farming where my grandfather farmed and my sons are farming there now* (Jer)

Ageing in place successfully is best served by having strong support networks such as family, neighbours and friends. The nature of Irish farming in the past

relied heavily on developing reciprocal relationships with others. The practice of patrilineal inheritance in Irish farming and the ideology of agrarian resilience and toughness in working the land often resulted in the socialisation of boys and young men in a distinctly male environment in the past. Resilience and toughness are also qualities admired in most team sports, so it is not surprising that most of the participants were involved in sporting associations such as the GAA.

Affiliation

When asked about organisational membership throughout their lives, the following comment is typical: *I started off in Na Macra Féirme...Macra did more for people like me;- left school at 14, the only education we got was the university of life; Macra organized night classes; that's where we got our education. Then I was involved in the GAA....it's a great outlet—you met people, they knocked the corners off you. Then I joined the IFA...*

However, after long-term involvement in organisations affiliated to one's previous occupation, it can be difficult to adjust to the loss of contact on retirement. One participant describes how this affected him *...I've been involved with organisations all my life...when you're involved in an organisation, the phone hardly ever stops ringing and that's a curse by times; but when you stop being involved, the phone stops ringing as well and when you're involved all your life, that's very disconcerting (Con)*

As accounts of involvement in organisations were relayed by every participant, it was not unexpected that references to membership of their own organisation would feature prominently. An important indicator of their long term involvement with this organisation is that each one of the participants had responded to a personal invitation to join: *I was asked by **** and I joined them, and there was a tour and I went off with them, and I'm coming here since...about 10 years. (Seamus)*

The opportunity to travel was an attraction for another: We went to Finland, Estonia, to Scotland, England and Wales” (Con)

I was invited to join...I said ‘that’s great because that’s something, -some outlet’. There are retired people’s groups, but some of those now, at meetings, they play bingo and bingo and me don’t see eye to eye’ (Bob)

When asked if they’d considered joining other retirement groups, it was clear what they preferred: *The active retirement has too many women (laughs) well, we let the men run it here.* (Mike)

Belonging

When the participants were asked to reflect on the benefits they derive from membership of a ‘men only’ retirement group, ‘camaraderie, friendship and travel’ were mentioned by most: *Friendship is the main thing, and travel inside and outside of Ireland....and camaraderie... I would look forward to this meeting from one ***day to another (Frank)*

It’s a social thing really...just to travel... I like the group you know; there’s a good sort of people in it; good characters and that”. (Mike)

The narrative of male composure emerged occasionally as here: *Well we’ve never had to cry on each other’s shoulders, do you understand? (Jer)*

However, comments by a founding member suggest organisations like this go further than providing a weekly social outlet when he said:

I think maybe men feel more comfortable in their own company, maybe than in mixed company. Now that might be a little bit...not politically correct now but...I think it’s in men’s nature to sit back and let women take over, I think that’s a fact, it’s not anyone’s fault, it just happens. Well, any of the groups that I know ...the amount of men that’s there are very few...they don’t seem to fit in. I suppose men aren’t going to say out as frank as women would...another

problem we have too is with health problems. People (men) will talk freely about being at the doctor... but in a mixed group, you're not going to talk that freely, that's what we find anyway."

Intergenerational Relationships

While friendship with their own gender and age group was highly valued by these participants, a different picture emerges with regard to younger members and newcomers in their communities. One focus group participant quoted a conversation he'd had with his elderly neighbour about new residents when the old man remarked: *'I know everyone in the graveyard here, but no one outside of it'*. There was general agreement that this is a new feature of life in rural areas due to in-migration.

On enquiring into intergenerational relationships in their own communities, apart from the GAA and local golf club, most social contact is through family, close neighbours or friends: *The GAA now...any young lads hurling, I know them all... and they know me, but you know, I wouldn't be able to keep in touch with them after that.* (Pete)

Living on the edge of town...people of my own age I know,--younger people, I don't; that's the way it is (Jer)

One possible explanation for the lack of social interaction between the generations was the closure of the only pub in the village. Although the majority of the participants were non drinkers, many regarded closure of rural pubs as a loss to everyone in the locality as stated here: *the pub is somewhere you can go even if you don't drink. You can go in and have your chat and talk to people and hear the local gossip* (Andy)

Most of the socialising was done in the pub. You'd meet up with the young crowd; yeah, it's a loss – it's a social thing I suppose. You know there was a lot of a birthday parties... 'twas a pity. (Frank)

Unlike urban areas, it appears that the 'local' was frequented by young and old, drinkers and non-drinkers alike and seems to be regarded as possibly the only public space accessible to all age groups and social class.

Concluding Comments

Rural living is often portrayed as having a high risk of isolation but there is little evidence to support that argument here. Using an emplacement lens, questions of identity and gender, the relevance of both ageing in place and attachment to place were considered, as well as the benefits of supportive social networks for rural men in later life. Through their collective identity as farmers, it is possible that early positive experiences of group membership such as Macra na Féirme and the GAA were enabling factors in organising themselves yet again to support one another in retirement. Such leadership qualities should be utilised by agencies or community groups for setting up similar men's groups in other rural areas to combat social isolation. As mixed gender social groups are less attractive to older men, greater efforts should be made by the various agencies when designing services to allow for the diverse needs of the older population. The usefulness of relying on printed media or even public meetings in attracting older men to join such groups as the OMO is severely challenged when the findings from this study revealed 100 per cent success rate came from personal invitations only.

However, notwithstanding such positivity, demographic changes in rural areas continue to challenge the older inhabitants as newcomers arrive perhaps in search of the rural idyll and the younger generation leave in search of employment or education. It must be remembered too that older people are not a homogeneous group and far more research is needed to address the more sensitive circumstances and needs of many other older men living in settings as diverse as urban, community or residential and indeed other rural situations too. Having a disability or chronic health problem may constrain one's regular participation in community life potentially leading to a life of disconnectedness, akin to *fading away* as quoted earlier.

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