The role of rural places in maintaining identity for long term rural residents and retirement migrants in north-east Victoria, Australia

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• Population ageing is more pronounced in rural areas

• Increasing evidence regarding the role of place in facilitating healthy ageing
  – Promotes wellbeing, constancy, security, competence and a positive self-image

• Places provide a framework within which identity can be constructed and transformed: gives rise to place identity
  – The use of environmental meaning to locate the self
  – The perception of being ‘at home’ in a place (Proshansky 1978, Cuba and Hummon 1993)
  – Collective as well as individual, social as well as physical (Dixon & Durrheim 2000)
Context

• Importance of place identity in context of age-related changes threatening identity (e.g. retirement)
  – Threats to place identity for rural older people
    • Age related change (e.g. loss of mobility)
    • Environmental change (e.g. demographic change, rural development/decline)
    • Can result in feelings of loss and ‘placelessness’

• Thus, need to determine how rural older people interact with their environments to maintain personal identity
  – Also a need to explore differences between retirement migrants/ageing in place
Theoretical framework

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996)

- Adapted from identity process theory (Breakwell 1986, 1992): explores how relationships with place can inform personal identity

- Places become significant to the self concept through their ability to facilitate:

  1) **Personal distinctiveness** (difference between self and others)
  2) **Place referent continuity** (relationships between past and present)
  3) **Place congruent continuity** (person/environment fit)
  4) **Self-esteem** (positive perceptions of self)
  5) **Self-efficacy** (ease in daily living)
Objective and method

How does rurality contribute to the development and maintenance of distinctiveness, continuity, self esteem and self-efficacy for older people residing in a rural area?

- Two case study sites located in north-east Victoria, Australia

- In depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 retired, community dwelling older adults (64-98 years)
  - 5 long term residents, 11 retirement migrants
  - Recruited through community contacts

- Data analysed utilising version of identity process theory adapted for application to place (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996)

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Location of case study communities

Population distribution in Victoria 2006

No. persons per km²
- More than 10
- 1 to 10
- Less than 1

Regional cities with more than 10,000 population

Source: ABS Census, 2006
Rurality and distinctiveness

Settlement identification (country vs. city)
‘I’m a country person now, yes’ (Betty, retirement migrant)

State/regional identifications (coming from a specific region)
‘I’m basically a north-east person’ (Robert, ageing in place)

Local identifications (part of the local community)
‘I feel like one of them’ (Mary, retirement migrant)

Personal distinctiveness (a long history of residence)
‘From the old town… born at the old hospital’ (Al, ageing in place)

• Local place identifications; settlement identifications most prevalent

• Many participants identified as ‘rural’ people, and compared this to city living

• Manner that retirement migrants and those ageing in place identified as locals was different
  – Length of residence for those ageing in place (personal distinctiveness)
  – Group affiliations, recognition and acceptance for retirement migrants
Rurality and place congruent continuity

Aspects of fit between person and rural environment:
• Qualities that were important to them and that enabled place satisfaction
• Often exhibited through comparison with urban environments

Physical features: e.g. quiet, scenic environments, open spaces, clean air, climate, the ‘rural’ environment

Social features: availability and quality of amenities, community spirit, perceived safety

Differences between retirement migrants/ageing in place:
• Ageing in place: physical/social environment part of their upbringing
• Retirement migrants: how well rural communities met their retirement expectations and personal values
Rurality and place referent continuity

Rurality as historical continuity: ‘I looked up at the ceiling and I remembered putting it up! So I don’t know how you can substitute that sort of thing, if you come to an area and you’re just new there and no roots and nothing to look back on what you’ve done, well I don’t know how you ever feel part of that community’ (Al, ageing in place)

Rurality as social continuity: ‘I’ve got connections, relatives everywhere here’ (Clarrie, ageing in place)

Rurality as conscious discontinuity: ‘So when we were ready to retire we just decided we didn’t want to stay in Melbourne’ (Betty, retirement migrant)

- Place referent continuity particularly important for long-term residents
  - Historical: physical features associated with their lives
  - Social: family connections, friends
  - A large part of what kept them there

- Retirement migrants less likely to discuss this
  - Some experienced historical continuity through holiday experiences in the area
  - More likely to discuss conscious discontinuity- rurality symbolic of a new period of their lives in retirement

- Threats to place referent continuity
Rurality and self esteem

Place characteristics:
• Distinctiveness of that rural community in relation to others

‘Our show is still surviving where a lot of country shows have folded up’ (Al, ageing in place)

Perceptions of outsiders:
• Pride in positive feedback from outsiders
• Retirement migrants: positive perceptions from city-dwelling families

‘It does make you feel good. To know that people enjoy coming here’ (Joan, retirement migrant)

Improvements in location:
• Community regeneration and improvements

‘They’ve sort of brightened the streets up a lot to what they used to be’. (Joan, retirement migrant)

Community recognition:
• Pride in positive community involvement, social capital

‘It makes you feel good that you have been able to be part of the building up process over a period of time’. (Peggy, retirement migrant)

• Threats to self-esteem
Rurality and self efficacy

**Safety:**
- Knowing people locally, lack of deviant behaviour

  ‘I can go out in the dark and won’t get mugged or hit… so that’s a wonderful thing here with us’ (Clarrie, ageing in place)

**Ease of access:**
- Easy access to activities and amenities; particularly for retirement migrants

  ‘I think there’s more to do here, I didn’t belong to any clubs in Melbourne’ (Mary, retirement migrant)

**Health and well-being:**
- Cleaner air, healthier environments
- Important for retirement migrants: would have to return to the city if experiencing poor health

  ‘There’s no pollution so that makes it a lot better to start with’ (Joan, retirement migrant)

**Community assistance:**
- Provision of personalised help and support if needed

  ‘If you’re in trouble, someone will come and help you if they know about it’ (Donald, retirement migrant)

**Threats to self-efficacy**
Conclusions

• Certain aspects of rurality are significant in building place identity

• Retirement migrants and long-term rural residents construct their place identities in different ways

• Changes in rural environments will impact the ability of these locations to provide distinctiveness, continuity, self esteem and self-efficacy for older people

• Research examining the impact of change on identity principles is needed to assess their impact on health and well-being