Ageing & Society (2022), **42**, 1465–1484
doi:10.1017/S0144686X2000166X

ARTICLE

Characterising older adults' engagement in age-friendly community initiatives: perspectives from core group leaders in the Northeast United States of America

Emily A. Greenfield* and Laurent Reyes

School of Social Work, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: egreenf@ssw.rutgers.edu

(Accepted 27 October 2020; first published online 11 December 2020)

Abstract

Researchers and programme champions alike have identified older adults as key contributors to age-friendly community change efforts. There has been very little scholarship, however, to characterise the nature of older adults' engagement in age-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs). To help address this gap, we drew on five waves of data from semi-structured interviews with core group members of eight AFCIs in a Northeast region of the United States of America. Interviews were conducted as part of a multi-year, community-engaged study on the development of philanthropically supported AFCIs. We iteratively coded segments of the interviews in which core group members described the involvement of older adults, as well as their efforts to engage older adults in the initiatives. This analysis resulted in an inductive-analytic typology with five qualitatively distinct categories, including older adults as: (a) consumers (receiving information, goods and services through the AFCI), (b) informants (sharing perspectives on ageing in the community with the core group), (c) task assistants (assisting with project-oriented tasks under the direction of the core group), (d) champions (contributing ideas and implementing action on their own initiative), and (e) core group members (holding primary responsibility for driving the work of the AFCI forward). We discuss implications of the typology for research on AFCI implementation and evaluation, as well as opportunities for AFCIs to enhance the engagement of older adults from historically marginalised groups.

Keywords: social participation; civic engagement; inclusion; volunteer; qualitative; theory; community practice; strengths-based

Introduction

Age-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs) are described as systematic, collaborative and multi-sector efforts to make social and physical environments at the local level more supportive of health and wellbeing as residents age in the community

(Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). Beginning in 2005 with the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Age-friendly Cities Project, AFCIs have expanded considerably over the past decade. With only 11 members in 2010, the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities grew to over 1,000 cities and communities by the end of 2019 (WHO, 2018). Places designated as members of this network are those whose government officials formally have committed to age-friendly community change (WHO, nd). Network members also formulate plans for progress across multiple domains – such as housing, transportation, communication and community supports – and are expected to work towards age-friendly goals over multi-year periods.

Academic researchers and programme champions alike have identified older adults as key actors in age-friendly community change processes (*e.g.* Garon *et al.*, 2014; Moulaert and Garon, 2016; Buffel and Phillipson, 2018; Del Barrio *et al.*, 2018). As Menec *et al.* (2011: 487) reflected early in the emergence of AFCIs, 'Presumably, older adults must be involved in identifying areas of need, prioritising key issues, and ensuring appropriate implementation. Engagement of older adults would be, therefore, essential'. At the same time, scholars have raised critical questions regarding older adults' engagement in AFCIs, such as the extent to which older adults are involved throughout long-term implementation (Filinson *et al.*, 2016), as well as best practices to facilitate participation, especially among older adults at risk of social exclusion (Gonyea and Hudson, 2015). Scholars also have cautioned that an over-reliance on individual community members to drive age-friendly community change forward can jeopardise the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the efforts (Winteron, 2016; Russell *et al.*, 2019).

Advancing research and practice on these issues necessitates a clearer conceptual understanding of the phenomenon of older adults' engagement in AFCIs. Theory development in this area, for example, can guide metrics for monitoring older adults' participation in AFCIs over time and evaluating the effectiveness of strategies to engage targeted sub-groups of older adults. It also can inform research studies on how aspects of AFCI implementation – such as the engagement of older adults in age-friendly community change processes – is associated with both community-level outputs and population health impact. Our study aimed to begin to advance knowledge in this area by drawing on semi-structured interview data from AFCI core groups in a Northeast region of the United States of America (USA) about their experiences of planning and implementing actions towards age-friendly community change in collaboration with others. We developed an empirically derived typology of older adults' engagement in AFCIs by iteratively coding core group members' accounts of older adults' involvement, as well as their own efforts to engage older adults in the initiatives.

AFCIs as a setting for older adults' engagement

As community change initiatives, AFCIs focus on improving local environments – as well as the broader systems in which they are embedded – that influence experiences of later life (Menec and Brown, 2018). AFCIs draw upon a range of methods to achieve community-level impact, such as conducting community needs assessments, forming multi-sector coalitions and engaging in advocacy campaigns

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Greenfield *et al.*, 2015). As community ageing initiatives, AFCIs aim to benefit older adults, in part, by facilitating their contributions (Menec, 2017). According to the WHO model, opportunities for civic and social participation in later life are defining features of age-friendly cities and communities (WHO, 2018). Moreover, the WHO requires community leaders to describe how they are 'engaging and involving older people in the processes of becoming a more age-friendly city/community' to join the global age-friendly network (WHO, nd).

Researchers have posited a variety of ways in which older adults can be engaged with AFCIs. As part of a survey of leaders of a variety of community ageing models in 2009 – some of which identified as AFCIs – Lehning *et al.* (2012) specified older adults' potential involvement in terms of providing input; developing the initiative; providing oversight or governance; providing services or support; and receiving services or supports. Others have focused on ways in which older adults contribute as leaders of AFCIs, such as by serving as co-researchers to help assess the needs of other older adults in the community and to identify priorities for community change (Buffel, 2018; King *et al.*, 2020). Similarly suggesting a range of levels of participation, Rémillard-Boilard *et al.* (2017: 146) drew on a framework from the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) to describe five potential 'mechanisms' for older adults' participation in AFCIs. The highest level of engagement – empowerment/co-production – involves older adults having final decision-making authority over the initiative, or older adults and other AFCI leaders being interdependent on each other in their work. The lowest level of engagement – information – refers to a one-way process whereby community leaders provide information to the public without seeking their comments or feedback.

Prior studies of older adults' engagement in AFCIs

Research on older adults' engagement in AFCIs mostly has been case descriptions, largely from within Europe and Canada (McGarry and Morris, 2011; Menec *et al.*, 2014; Buffel, 2018). Case studies in Manchester (United Kingdom) and Brussels (Belgium) characterised older adults as having responsibility for developing AFCIs, engaging other older adults and advocating for the priority issues they had identified (Buffel *et al.*, 2014). These studies further described a support staff or researcher who helped older adults develop necessary skills and connected them to resources, thereby increasing their capacity to affect change. The initiatives' action plans emphasised older adults' engagement in decision-making, project delivery and service design, with deliberate strategies to reach marginalised and socially isolated older adults with the help of community groups, alliances and older adults themselves. In addition, both case examples described an intentional aim to create volunteer opportunities for older adults within the AFCIs and through intergenerational projects (Buffel *et al.*, 2014).

In contrast, studies of AFCIs in other settings have found older adults to be engaged in more limited ways. Some studies have described older adults as providing input on ageing in the community through surveys, focus groups or meetings, to be later considered for an action plan or strategy agenda (Liddle *et al.*, 2014; Novek and Menec, 2014). In addition, studies have referred to older adults'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

assistance with specific tasks, such as helping to disseminate questionnaires as part of community needs assessments (Greenfield, 2018; Nykiforuk *et al.*, 2019).

Focus of the current study

To our knowledge, no prior study has used empirical methods to develop theory on a comprehensive range of ways in which older adults participate in AFCIs. We use data from a longitudinal study of AFCIs under a grant-making programme of local philanthropies in northern New Jersey (USA) (*see* the Methods section) as a unique opportunity to begin understanding this phenomenon from the perspective of AFCI core group members. Core groups are described as the team of people who are 'responsible for guiding the livability project through the assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation steps' (AARP, 2018: 10). We aimed to advance knowledge by using qualitative research methods to derive a typology of older adults' engagement based on core group members' descriptions of how older adults are involved in their communities' initiatives, as well as their own efforts to engage older adults' participation. Typologies are useful for describing a phenomenon in terms of categories that relate to each other through their connection to an underlying concept, but that are also distinguishable from each other (Ayres and Knafl, 2008). We aimed to develop an inductive-analytic typology, which involves the researcher identifying patterns within the data underlying qualitatively distinct categories and sub-categories of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Our approach was guided by frameworks on individual participation in community change initiatives. Specifically, we were sensitised by insights from Rémillard *et al.* (2017), as well as Arnstein's (1969) 'Ladder of Citizen Participation', which defines participation as a redistribution of power among citizens to involve them in the planning and development of community initiatives. The lowest 'rung' on the ladder is manipulation (garnering support from citizens without asking for their input), followed by therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control. Similarly, Rémillard *et al.* (2017) discuss the IAPP framework that identifies civic engagement through information, consultation, collaboration and empowerment. The authors argue for the application of such a framework to ensure the inclusion of older residents in age-friendly communities. While we were sensitised by this theorising, we did not set out to test these theories but, instead, familiarised ourselves with these frameworks as we inductively analysed core group members' accounts of how older adults engage in AFCIs.

Methods

Research design and setting

This study emerged as part of an ongoing community-engaged project to examine the development of AFCIs in northern New Jersey (USA). The overarching aim of the parent study is to understand how core group members approach developing AFCIs across diverse community and organisational contexts, as well as over time, in partnership with others. The regional network of AFCIs in northern

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

New Jersey began in 2015, at which time two philanthropic organisations committed to a multi-year grant-making programme to support the development of AFCIs in their respective geographic catchment areas. The AFCIs under this programme received initial planning grants in January 2016 and have received successive grants for implementation in the years following.

The parent study was designed as a developmental evaluation – an approach to understand a new programme model as it emerges over time, while also using research methods to contribute to the model's development (Patton, 2011). In this sense, developmental evaluation is a type of action research, as it seeks to generate knowledge about a social system while also attempting to influence that system (Bradbury, 2015). Consistent with this approach, the first-listed author (EAG) has been serving as an active contributor on the northern New Jersey AFCI development team since the formative stages of the regional network. She has participated by planning and delivering presentations at regional meetings among AFCI leaders; responding to leaders' requests for information; working with the AFCI leaders to present on their efforts at local, national and international conferences; and consulting with the funders on strategic directions for the long-term sustainability of their grantees' efforts. The second-listed author (LR) joined the project as a Research Assistant in 2018.

Sample

The current study focuses on the eight AFCIs that have been part of the network since 2016. The unit of sampling for the project was each initiative's core group, as opposed to specific individuals. At a minimum, interviews across all waves included a project co-ordinator or director who could speak to the efforts of the core team and other actors. At the most recent wave of interviews (spring 2019), the auspice for six of the initiatives was in the private, not-for-profit sector, and two were within municipal government. Table 1 displays summary statistics for the demographic characteristics of each of the initiatives' geographic catchment areas.

EAG conducted semi-structured interviews with the core group members at five time-points: twice in 2016 (Time 1 (T1) and T2), once in early 2017 (T3), once in late 2017 through to early 2018 (T4) and once in 2019 (T5). Data collection at T1 was conducted at the outset of the AFCIs' formation, and the AFCIs were still in the planning phase at T2. At T3, the initiatives were finalising their action plans and starting to transition towards working on age-friendly goals (*i.e.* implementation). The initiatives at T4 and T5 were approximately one and two years, respectively, into the implementation phase of their work.

At T1, the researcher invited persons listed as the primary contact on the AFCI grant applications to participate in an interview. Contact persons also were instructed to invite any other individuals whom they considered as leaders of their initiative at that time. Except for two of the initiatives, at least one core team member remained the same at each wave of data collection. At T5, six of the eight initiatives encompassed core teams whose members all identified as non-Hispanic White, and six of the core teams included at least one member who was age 60 or older. The professional backgrounds of core team members

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Summary of select demographic characteristics of the geographic catchment areas for eight age-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs) in northern New Jersey

Initiative number	Total population size	Percentage of population aged 65 and older	Percentage of population White alone, not Hispanic or Latina/o	Median income (in 2018 US$)	Percentage of population aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher
1	42,071	11.6	55.3	132,703	66.0
2	11,078	19.0	66.0	102,938	51.0
3	36,406	13.5	79.3	155,512	72.9
4	25,056	13.9	73.0	168,608	75.4
5	129,216	9.9	13.3	46,975	13.2
6	40,284	16.3	45.6	109,677	56.9
7	31,802	11.2	55.4	57,161	20.0
8	28,402	15.9	33.6	84,342	43.9

Note: Weighted sums were calculated for two of the AFCIs' catchment areas that encompassed more than one municipality.
Source: Data retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts on 19 October 2020.

varied, including social work, public health, law enforcement, nursing, business and communications.

Data collection

Data collection for the parent study took place as semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews involve asking open-ended questions and provide an opportunity to go more in-depth on topics that are of importance to participants and researchers. The order and presentation of questions in semi-structured interviews can differ across participants because of the researcher's flexibility to ask additional questions and probes based on how the conversation develops (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). The interviews at each wave of data collection broadly covered the same topics for all eight initiatives. Nevertheless, questions were customised to explore different themes in more or less depth in accordance with the progression of the eight interviews as a set within each wave, as well as the progression of information that each core team shared in the context of their specific interview. Guided by Campbell's (2015) framework for the sustainability of age-friendly community efforts – which outlines structures, contexts and processes presumed to be important for long-term community change – the interviews at each wave addressed the initiatives' leadership, key partners, relationship to local government, involvement of older residents and community members in general, and plans for sustainability post-initial grant funding.

Although all waves yielded age-friendly core team members' descriptions of ways in which older adults engaged in the initiatives, the T5 wave focused explicitly on older adults' engagement vis-a-vis a dedicated segment of the interview protocol on this topic alone. Sample questions included: 'What has been your experiences with engaging older adults as volunteers and participants in initiative programmes and services?' and 'Describe the mix of older residents and professionals on your advisory groups. Do you see their roles as being more similar or different?' The T5 wave also included questions about older adults' engagement designed specifically for each site based on preliminary analysis of prior waves of interview data. For example, at earlier waves, some participants described their plans to develop an 'ambassadors group' as a formal structure to facilitate older adults' engagement. At T5, we asked follow-up questions specifically about these groups, including ways in which the ambassadors were involved and how core group members viewed the ambassadors relative to other AFCI contributors.

Interviews at T1 were approximately 90 minutes in length; at T2–T5 they were approximately 120 minutes in length. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and entered into software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo 12).

Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the Human Subjects Board at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (USA). At the beginning of each interview, the researchers reviewed with participants an informed consent document with information about the project. The informed consent process emphasised that participation was voluntary and that participants were welcome to share as much as they would like

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

in response to any of the questions. The researchers also assured participants of the confidentiality of their answers and that information and quotes would be presented in project reports without disclosing their personal identity or attaching the name of their community to any piece of information from the interview. Each individual participant at the interviews was asked to sign a statement to grant formally their informed consent to participate. All audio files and transcriptions from the interviews have been maintained in password-protected directories, and the researchers eliminated the names of all individuals from the transcriptions, including those of the participant and other individuals whom the participants referenced in the interviews.

Data analysis

Before beginning T5 data collection, LR reviewed prior data from T1 to T4 and developed structured memos that summarised each site based on the T1–T4 coding. This preparatory analysis facilitated the development of questions on older adults' engagement for T5 data collection and provided an overall understanding of how core groups have described the engagement of older adults since the initiatives' inception. While transcripts from the semi-structured interviews are the focus of our analysis, the researchers brought to this analysis their background understandings of the initiatives in other ways. They reviewed memos that EAG had written after conducting each interview to understand the overarching development of each initiative across the time-points. Throughout the years, they also attended various meetings to convene the core teams across the region, which were organised as part of the philanthropies' grant-making programme. At these meetings, core groups shared information about their initiatives with each other and also reflected on programmatic concerns. The researchers further attended an advisory council meeting for one of the initiatives during T5 data collection as non-participant observers, which allowed the researchers to observe older adults' participation and core group members' engagement of older adults directly in 'real time'.

The formal analysis on older adults' engagement began after T5 data collection was complete. We used all data from the T5 interviews, as well as data from T1 to T4 that was coded during the earlier phase of analysis. All data were coded by LR, with EAG coding a more limited subset of excerpts. The researchers met on multiple occasions to discuss the analytic process, review preliminary findings and strategise on subsequent iterations of the primary codes. The analysis began with initial coding, which involved the researcher engaging with the data to allow preliminary ideas to emerge and to examine potential directions for further analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Next, axial coding was conducted, whereby conceptually similar codes from the first iteration were organised and combined under broader categories of meaning (Blair, 2015). Both authors conducted subcoding (Saldaña, 2015), which involved coding smaller portions of text within the text already coded under primary categories.

Once we finalised themes and summarised them into a statement of findings, we shared a draft of the manuscript with the core groups who participated in T5 as part of a member check. Participants overall agreed that the categories of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

engagement made sense and reflected their perceptions of older adults' engagement in the initiatives. However, one core group member stated that reading the paper made her reflect more on ways in which she is an older adult herself and that she would encourage a fifth category of 'organiser' who carries out the day-to-day business of the AFCI. In response to this feedback, we returned to axial coding, as we re-organised and expanded the codes based on this feedback. In the process, we developed a fifth category titled 'core group member'. We then analysed the excerpts to determine the ways in which this category was described by the participants, as presented in the results below.

Results

Results indicated five primary categories of engagement, including older adults as: (a) consumers, (b) informants, (c) task assistants, (d) champions, and (e) core group members. We describe each of these categories below, as well as the ways the AFCI core group members described their efforts to engage older adults under each category. We present categories of engagement on a continuum similar to the IAPP framework as discussed by Rémillard-Boilard *et al.* (2017), beginning with the most passive category (*i.e.* consumers) to more active engagement (*i.e.* core group members). The quotes that follow are collectively from seven out of the eight core groups. (We do not use aliases from Table 1 out of concern for breach of confidentiality through deductive disclosure.)

Consumers

Participants described older adults, in part, as recipients of information, goods and services either created by the AFCI core group directly, or through the core group's partnership with other organisations. We refer to this category of engagement as *consumers*. Interviews with core group members suggested that this category was common across the initiatives and that large numbers of older adults engaged in this way. Our analysis revealed three main ways in which core groups described engaging older adults as consumers: (a) by inviting them to community events and programmes, (b) by providing information through initiative-related communications platforms, and (c) by providing one-to-one assistance when it was requested.

First, many core teams described older adults' engagement *vis-à-vis* their attendance at AFCI-related events. In most cases, core groups described planning these events in collaboration with other organisations, such as libraries, senior centres, and local health and social service providers. Some also described sharing information with older adults at events hosted by other organisations – such as by having an initiative-sponsored tent at summer concerts and farmer's markets. Most typically, core groups noted ways in which these events provided information about health and ageing topics, including community resources. Some initiatives also described hosting celebratory events where older adults would be invited to come together to socialise, enjoy entertainment and celebrate their community.

Second, core teams described how they disseminated information to residents in middle and later life through AFCI communications platforms and products. Many

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

initiatives created resource directories and communication tools through social media, newsletters and websites. For example, one initiative described older adults' enthusiasm for a community calendar, which aggregated information about events of relevance for older residents in the locality:

> They like knowing what's going on, even if they don't do it [*i.e.* attend the events] … A lot of times they say, 'Oh! Finally, our town is doing something for us!' It's been there all along, but they didn't know about it.

Furthermore, several initiatives described ways in which they provided individual residents with one-to-one information assistance. Especially as the AFCI core group members became better known in the community over time, they described how older residents increasingly would contact them directly with specific service needs and questions, such as about health insurance, discount programmes and transportation. For example, one core group member stated:

> I am getting more phone calls and more emails about people just wanting me to follow up on something they've heard about … I just got a phone call from a woman today that was looking for a way to get transportation to a doctor's office – to have transportation from one doctor and then get to the other doctor after that – and then maybe another one after that. So, we talked about different things she could do.

Informants

The category of *informants* refers to older adults sharing their opinions, attitudes and experiences of living in the community with core group members, as well as feedback on the initiatives' plans. Like consumers, themes relating to this category were common across the interviews and suggested that large numbers of older adults engaged in this way. Our analysis revealed two main ways in which core groups described engaging older adults as informants: (a) through open community efforts (*e.g.* public forums, focus groups, surveys), and (b) through groups created as part of the AFCI (*e.g.* advisory councils, committees).

First, many core teams described how they engaged older residents through town hall-style meetings, forums, focus groups, surveys and interviews. Through these mechanisms, older adults were asked to give their input on needs in the community, as well as to share aspects of their experiences of living in the community. Core groups described this type of engagement moreso in the beginning stages of the initiatives' development, particularly in the context of the community assessments during the planning phase. However, at T5 several initiatives discussed their plans to re-assess older adults in the community to examine change in perceptions of ageing in the community or to learn more about specific domains of community life (*e.g.* transportation and housing options).

Another way that older adults were described as engaging as informants was through their participation in steering committees and advisory councils. Core groups reported convening these groups monthly to quarterly, serving as a way for core groups to communicate with their target population and to receive ongoing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

feedback from residents and other stakeholders as the initiative developed. In most cases, the groups included older residents and professionals (*e.g.* local service providers who work with older adults), although some initiatives described creating advisory boards exclusively for older residents.

One initiative discussed how their senior advisory committee initially was organised to provide input on how to improve the local senior centre; over time, the group provided insights on other areas for improvement, such as transportation options and 'sidewalks that need to be repaired, crosswalks they're concerned about. It's shaping up to be more than just the senior centres'. Similarly, another initiative described a meeting with the senior advisory committee where they discussed accessibility issues for all community-wide events, not just those targeted to older adults. As the quote below demonstrates, the role of older adults on the committee was described as raising a concern to the AFCI core group, who then liaised with local authorities on the older adults' behalf:

> One of the first things that came up at the senior advisory committee was inclusion in regular events – not just senior events, but regular events. So, I've already spoken to the police and the department of health on how to make our summer events more accessible. That's kind of the low hanging fruit that, for years, seniors have complained about. They can't get to them. And that's something we can deliver right away. The police can do something for parking. The health department can help with something else. And we can get them out in the community again.

Task assistants

We refer to the third category of engagement as *task assistants*: older adults who voluntarily give their time and skills to the AFCI to help with specific tasks, largely under the direction of the core group. This theme was less common in the data relative to the prior two categories, but more prevalent than the subsequent two categories (*i.e.* champions and core group members). Our analysis revealed two main ways in which core groups described how they engaged older adults as task assistants: (a) by recruiting one-time assistants, and (b) by engaging volunteer group members.

Regarding one-time assistants, core group members described their efforts to find older adult volunteers to assist with time-limited and discrete tasks, such as conducting sidewalk audits and providing assistance at AFCI events. Themes related to this sub-category emerged especially later in the initiatives' development, when core teams reported working on the implementation of a greater number of programmes and projects. Examples of recruitment strategies included a call for volunteers in an initiative newsletter, networking with local organisations, personal calls and emails to individuals, and survey questions asking if respondents wanted to get involved. Some core groups described how they learned about older residents' interests and skillsets to identify optimal ways for them to contribute. For example, one core group member reflected:

> [The older adults] sort of look to us as the leaders. They will help, they will be a part of it, but none of them have really taken the lead in saying this is something I

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> think we should be doing … They like to be involved in helping implement things. They all have different talents and gifts … When we did a wellness fair, one of them is a retired nurse, so she helped with all the wellness checks. Whatever their skillsets are that they can offer, they help.

Volunteer group members constituted another sub-category, referring to a group of older adults who would meet regularly – either as part of or independent of the initiative – and who would provide assistance to AFCI core group members. Unlike one-time assistants, task group members were described as having an ongoing presence within the AFCI (such as by attending advisory council meetings), and were often called upon to provide feedback, conduct outreach, and assist with the planning of programmes and projects under the management of the AFCI core group. For example, one of the initiatives organised a group of older residents into a 'docent group', which later developed into age-friendly 'ambassadors'. Trained by the core group members, members of this volunteer group were placed in the community to provide information about resources and AFCI-sponsored programmes and events. A core group member described the role of the docents as follows, reflecting the ambassador group's work under the direction of the core group:

> We were talking about having the docents go out into the community and make presentations. So I'm lining up the presentations knowing where people might want to have them stationed … We did the training. We had about a three-session training session, and we're continuing to do that.

Although many of the volunteer groups developed as part of the AFCI, in other cases, AFCIs partnered with existing groups of older adults and integrated them within their initiatives. For example, in one of the initiatives, a group for older residents had been meeting for years prior to the establishment of the AFCI; the core group began to work with the established group and facilitate some of the volunteer group's own projects as part of the AFCI. For example, they discussed their collaboration on a volunteer fair, and while the AFCI was doing much of the event planning – such as creating a flyer, securing space and organising presenters for the event – the older adult volunteer group did 'the feet on the ground, the connections and getting people to come'.

Champions

Another category of engagement that emerged from the data was older adults as *champions*. Based on the prevalence of this theme within the data, as well as core group members' characterisation of this category, the data suggested older adults as champions were less common relative to the prior categories of engagement. Similar to task assistants, champions also gave their time and skills to assist with initiative projects. Unlike task assistants, however, champions took more autonomy in initiating actions and influencing the initiatives' broader impact at the community level. Interviews revealed two main ways in which core groups described engaging with older adults as champions: (a) by supporting their strategic boundary spanning, and (b) by collaborating with champions to implement ideas for action.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

First, some initiatives described older adult champions as being self-led community residents who served to enhance the position of the AFCI within broader and more powerful networks of organisational leaders and residents. They were described as doing this outreach somewhat spontaneously (*i.e.* without being directed by the core group) and focusing their linking efforts specifically towards community leaders. For example, one core group described how an older resident involved with the board of trustees for the local senior centre was instrumental in getting the mayor to attend a senior centre donor appreciation party and signing a pledge to indicate the locality's commitment to age-friendliness. Another initiative described the role of a champion in helping to get more than 100 people to attend a specific council meeting that AFCI core group members had requested to be scheduled in the afternoon to accommodate the meeting preferences of many older residents. A core group member explained:

> One of our members who is on more than one task force and steering committee is very active with the [local government's] senior citizens [advisory committee] … She ran around to every place that she could, not necessarily representing [the initiative] but representing older residents to make sure that people knew, and would come, because she was very fearful that if no one came, they wouldn't do it again [*i.e.* schedule the council meeting during the day]. So, I think she deserves a lot of credit because she was going to ensure that they were there.

Similar to informants, champions also were described as people bringing information about issues to the core group. However, unlike informants, core groups described champions as individuals who identified unmet needs in the community and then worked in ongoing partnership with the core group to address that need better. For example, in one of the initiatives, an older resident helping to raise her grandchildren suggested the idea of creating a peer support group for other grandparents like herself. She was an active participant in the initiative and brought up the idea to the core group, who worked with her to develop a social media group for residents caring for grandchildren. The core group facilitated this work, but the older resident recruited participants and was reported as maintaining the group independently.

Core group members

The fifth category of engagement was *core group members*, referring to older adults serving as part of the group of people with primary responsibility for driving forward the work of the AFCI across multiple domains of community life (*e.g.* information and communication, transportation, social participation). The application of this code was similar in prevalence to that of champions in the data, with lesser usage compared to codes for the other three categories. Whereas champions were described as contributing to the initiatives in more *ad hoc* ways, core group members were formally included within the group of people meeting regularly and leading the overall strategic direction for the AFCIs as a whole. Also, unlike the other categories, core group members were more formally appointed to their position – such as through the funding arrangement with the grant makers or through the auspice organisation in which the AFCI was embedded. The analysis suggested two ways in which older

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

adults served as core group members: (a) by being paid AFCI professional staff, and (b) by serving on the core group as community volunteers.

Many of the AFCI core group members interviewed were in middle or later life themselves, and a few of them currently lived in – or had formerly lived or worked in – their AFCI's focal community. Although they spoke extensively in the interviews about their role in leading the AFCI, it was rare within the interviews for participants to refer to their own age identity or their status as a resident in the community. For example, when asked about professionals who are older residents but may not identify as older adults, one core group member responded, 'That would be me.' At an earlier wave of data collection, this core group member described the purpose of the initiative as an opportunity to enhance the life of residents as they age, further remarking that 'it is being sort of selfish because I'd like to stay here as I age'.

One exception was an initiative whose coordinator was a former resident, who had spent most of her childhood and adulthood in the AFCI's locality. She described how she was personally affected by the rising costs of housing in the community and the lack of more affordable options, eventually leading her to relocate to a neighbouring municipality. Her fellow core group members expressed that having someone with a personal history in the municipality strengthened their advocacy and made their work more relatable to community members and local officials: 'It carries a lot of weight with people that [she] had to move out of the community but is [now] back in the community and working in the community.'

In one initiative, older residents served on the core group – in a similar capacity to the professionals – but not as part of paid positions. This initiative had included one older adult as a primary member and volunteer on the core group since its initial planning phase. By the fifth wave of data collection, several additional older adults had become formal officers on the initiative's governance board and identified as members of the core group in a voluntary capacity. They reported engaging in strategic action steps in between AFCI meetings and actively deliberating on strategies for long-term sustainability. As an example, the initial resident on the core group helped to ensure the AFCI's continuity early in its development when it became necessary to transition its auspice from local government to another organisation. They described the strategic conversations in which this core group member participated to deliberate on whether the initiative could be incorporated as part of a local ageing services organisation, within another unit of local government, or be established as an independent not-for-profit organisation. Once the team arrived at its decision, the core group member helped to organise financial statements and completed other paperwork to establish formally the new auspice for the initiative.

Discussion

Drawing on semi-structured interview data from a multi-year study with core group members of eight grant-funded AFCIs in northern New Jersey, we aimed to develop an empirically derived typology of older adults' engagement in AFCIs. Findings indicated five qualitatively distinct categories: consumers, informants, task assistants, champions and core group members (for a summary, *see* Table 2).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 2. Categories of older adults' engagement in age-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs)

Category	Definition
Consumers	Receives information, goods and services through the AFCI
Informants	Shares opinions, attitudes, experiences of living in the community and feedback on AFCI core groups' plans
Task assistants	Donates time and skills to help with specific tasks under the direction of the AFCI core group
Champions	Engages in strategic boundary-spanning, as well as contributes ideas and implements action on behalf of the AFCI, on their own initiative
Core group members	Holds primary responsibility for driving the work of the AFCI forward, sharing ownership for the long-term and overall success of age-friendly community change processes

Note: Categories derived from an analysis of five waves of semi-structured interviews with core group members of eight AFCIs in northern New Jersey, collected from 2016 to 2019.

Although prior studies have described some aspects of older adults' participation in AFCIs as part of case descriptions (*e.g.* Buffel *et al.*, 2014), or have theorised broadly on older adults' engagement in AFCIs without the use of empirical methods (*e.g.* Rémillard-Boilard *et al.*, 2017), this study is the first to analyse data from AFCI core groups across multiple sites and over time to derive a typology. These findings contribute to efforts to advance beyond the idea that AFCIs involve the contributions of a range of people, organisations and sectors. Results enhance understanding of the particular ways in which older adults are engaged, as well as the organisational structures and processes to cultivate such engagement (*e.g.* through age-friendly groups, surveys, community events, communications platforms).

Our study's delineation of different categories of engagement indicates that there is no singular role of 'older adults' within AFCIs. Instead, older adults (and arguably actors of any age and social position within a community) can assume a variety of roles as part of coordinated age-friendly action; the meaning of this action is embedded within the broader social contexts that organise how AFCI actors interact with each other. Each category of older adults' engagement assumed its meaning relative to the behaviours of other AFCI actors, which, in the case of our study's setting, was primarily the core groups. For example, older adults as consumers were described as receiving information, goods and services, as facilitated by the AFCI core groups and partnering organisations. Task assistants and champions were described as contributing to planning and implementation steps, relative to the degree of direction set by the core groups.

Findings orient attention to broader theoretical questions on what AFCIs are, or should be, especially in terms of their approach to creating age-friendly community change (Scharlach and Lehning, 2016). Early conceptual developments on age-friendly communities identified that initiatives differ in terms of their degree of top-down *versus* bottom-up governance (Lui *et al.*, 2009). Top-down initiatives are led and implemented by professionals, policy makers, and local authorities with technical expertise and formal organisational authority. This approach to age-friendly community change emphasises older adults as consumers and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X Published online by Cambridge University Press

informants – consistent with prior characterisations of AFCIs as social planning approaches (Scharlach and Lehning, 2016). Bottom-up approaches are led and implemented by community members on their own behalf. This approach to age-friendly community change would engage older adults more so as champions and core group members – consistent with calls for more intentionally creating opportunities for older adults to take a lead role in working towards community change (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018).

In addition to its implications for understanding heterogeneity in the implementation of AFCIs, results also can help to identify differences in perspectives regarding what constitutes the meaningful participation of older adults (and community residents more broadly) in age-friendly community change processes. For example, some might consider responding to an age-friendly community survey (*i.e.* as an informant) to be a meaningful form of participation. Others might perceive this engagement as a form of tokenism – the action of inviting input from the target population, but not providing any genuine opportunity to influence decisions made on their behalf (Arnstein, 1969). This study's typology provides a heuristic for AFCI collaborators to identify and discuss such different viewpoints within their work together.

The typology also can assist efforts to increase the engagement of older adults in community change processes and to monitor progress over time. Overall, the framework indicates the value of developing metrics that reference specific categories of engagement in place of questions on older adults' participation, leadership or volunteering in general. Findings suggest even counts of the number of older adults on AFCI advisory committees to be limited in deeper conceptual meaning. For example, some older adults on age-friendly advisory committees might serve as consumers whereby their participation is solely to receive information from other members at these meetings. Others might serve as informants, sharing their opinions to core group members, yet having little authority over key decisions. Other older adults might set the agenda for the advisory committee as core group members, as part of their deeper and strategic responsibility for age-friendly community change. Overall, our findings suggest the importance of measuring older adults' engagement in terms of categories of role enactment as opposed to a singular behaviour.

The typology also has implications for research on key questions concerning the long-term viability and impact of AFCIs (Lehning and Greenfield, 2017). Studies that address distinct categories of engagement among older adults can examine whether specific forms of participation are associated with particular outputs and outcomes across diverse community contexts. For example, are AFCIs with a greater number of older adults as champions more likely to be sustained over time? Is older adults' engagement as task assistants especially important for AFCIs that have fewer paid staff or lesser availability of organisational partners? Is older adults' engagement as informants particularly important for community progress in some domains of liveability relative to others? Do older adults who serve on core teams as paid professionals perform the role differently than older adults who serve on core teams as high-intensity volunteers? The findings of this study can inform both qualitative and quantitative studies designed to address such questions.

This typology also can be useful for research and evaluation on issues of social inequalities and inclusion within and across AFCIs. Scholars have called for AFCIs to more forcefully consider 'the full diversity of ageing experiences' (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018: 181) and to avoid exacerbating the exclusion of older adults from marginalised groups (Lehning *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, researchers have questioned the success of AFCIs in including historically marginalised groups of older adults (Gonyea and Hudson, 2015). Results from this study can guide the evaluation of strategies to engage older adults from under-represented backgrounds. The typology encourages identifying the over- and under-representation of older adults from diverse social backgrounds within particular categories of engagement and to strategise on targeted ways to address disparities. For example, scholars have noted that stipends for older adult volunteers are especially important for engaging and sustaining the involvement of individuals from historically marginalised racial/ethnic groups (McBride *et al.*, 2011). This suggests the importance of financial support for attracting and retaining older adults from marginalised groups, especially at more active categories of engagement, such as core group leaders. These considerations are likely essential for ensuring that AFCIs more forcefully address issues of (in)equity and represent the priorities of older adults from different socio-economic and ethno-racial backgrounds (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018).

Despite this study's contributions, it is important to note its limitations. First, this study was conducted in one region in the USA (northern New Jersey), wherein all initiatives were receiving multi-year financial support from private philanthropy. Some themes might emerge more prominently, in different ways, and to greater or lesser degrees, in other geo-political and organisational contexts. For example, even within the USA alone, communities list a variety of individuals and organisations with primary responsibility for moving their AFCIs forward, including volunteer chairpersons of local government commissions, paid employees across various units of local government (*e.g.* human services, parks and recreation), professionals within private not-for-profit organisations and individual community volunteers who are not affiliated with a formal organisation (AARP, 2020). Older adults as core group members might be especially relevant within AFCIs that emerge from grassroots resident efforts (*e.g.* Oh, 2015), whereas older adults as consumers and informants might be more prominent within initiatives led by service delivery organisations. Therefore, another limitation of this study relates to issues of data saturation – especially with respect to depth of understanding the categories of engagement that were relatively rare in our data (champions and core group members). In addition, while the authors discussed the codes and themes as they developed, we recognise that our analysis may be limited given that LR primarily conducted the coding.

Moreover, findings are based on interviews with AFCI core team members, who mostly were paid professionals and who rarely identified as older residents within the interviews. Future studies that engage with older residents directly to test and elaborate on the findings of this study are necessary. For example, several participants in the current study described challenges in engaging older adults beyond the roles of consumer or informant, stating that many residents have long-standing commitments to other causes and local groups, which makes them less available for more intensive role engagements with the AFCI. Systematically developing theory

on individual, programmatic and community contexts that influence older adults' engagement across particular categories – especially from the perspective of community residents themselves – constitutes an important direction for future research. Furthermore, consulting with older adults on the findings from this study also would advance understanding of how older adults themselves interpret different types and opportunities for engagement in AFCIs.

Additionally, given the broader aims of the parent study, none of the waves focused exclusively on older adults' engagement. Because of resulting data limitations, this study was not able to address other important questions, such as how AFCI core group members perceive the significance of older adults' participation relative to other partners, what strategies they use to encourage older adults from different backgrounds to become engaged in particular ways, and how the AFCI core groups' own systems of meaning around participation in later life influence older adults' engagement in age-friendly community change processes.

Despite these limitations, this typology helps to establish a foundation for continued empirical study of older adults' engagement in AFCIs and related community change efforts (*e.g.* King *et al.*, 2020). AFCIs are a new and rapidly emerging phenomenon, and there have been growing calls for gerontologists' more explicit involvement in community change processes (Greenfield *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, developing theory and research on core aspects of AFCI implementation – such as the engagement of older adults – is essential to guide policy, programmes and research to make place-based communities better and more equitable for long lives.

Financial support. This work was supported by The Grotta Fund for Senior Care; and The Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation.

Ethical standards. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board.

References

AARP (2018) *Roadmap to Livability: Strategies and Solutions That Make a Community Great for People of All Ages*. Available at https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/livable-communities/livable-documents/documents-2018/Book-1-Roadmap-to-Livability-Web-010218.pdf.

AARP (2020) *The Member List*. Available at https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2014/member-list.html.

Arnstein SR (1969) A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* **35**, 216–224.

Ayres L and Knafl KA (2008) Typological analysis. In Given LM (ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, p. 901.

Blair E (2015) A reflexive exploration of two qualitative data coding techniques. *Journal of Methods and Measurement in the Social Sciences* **6**, 14–29.

Bradbury H (2015) Introduction: How to situate and define action research. In Bradbury H (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 1–12.

Buffel T (2018) Older coresearchers exploring age-friendly communities: an 'insider' perspective on the benefits and challenges of peer-research. *The Gerontologist* **59**, 538–548.

Buffel T and Phillipson C (2018) A manifesto for the age-friendly movement: developing a new urban agenda. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* **30**, 173–192.

Buffel T, McGarry P, Phillipson C, De Donder L, Dury S, De Witte N and Verté D (2014) Developing age-friendly cities: case studies from Brussels and Manchester and implications for policy and practice. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* **26**, 52–72.

Campbell J (2015) *Guiding Principles for the Sustainability of Age-friendly Community Efforts*. Available at https://www.giaging.org/documents/160107__Sustainability_Principles.pdf.

Charmaz K (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd Edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Del Barrio E, Marsillas S, Buffel T, Smetcoren AS and Sancho M (2018) From active ageing to active citizenship: the role of (age) friendliness. *Social Sciences* **7**, 134.

Filinson R, Raimondo M and Maigret M (2016) Building age-friendly community: notes from the field. *Sociology Between the Gaps: Forgotten and Neglected Topics* **2**. Available at http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/sbg/vol2/iss1/10.

Garon S, Paris M, Beaulieu M, Veil A and Laliberté A (2014) Collaborative partnership in age-friendly cities: two case studies from Quebec, Canada. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* **26**, 73–87.

Gonyea JG and Hudson RB (2015) Emerging models of age-friendly communities: a framework for understanding inclusion. *Public Policy & Ageing Report* **25**, 9–14.

Greenfield EA (2018) Getting started: an empirically derived logic model for age-friendly community initiatives in the early planning phase. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* **61**, 295–312.

Greenfield EA, Oberlink M, Scharlach AE, Neal MB and Stafford PB (2015) Age-friendly community initiatives: conceptual issues and key questions. *The Gerontologist* **55**, 191–198.

Greenfield EA, Black K, Buffel T and Yeh J (2019) Community gerontology: a framework for research, policy, and practice on communities and ageing. *The Gerontologist* **59**, 803–810.

Kallio H, Pietilä AM, Johnson M and Kangasniemi M (2016) Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* **72**, 2954–2965.

King AC, King DK, Banchoff A, Solomonov S, Ben Natan O, Hua J, Gardiner P, Rosas LG, Rodriguez Espinosa P, Winter SJ, Sheats J, Salvo D, Aguilar-Farias N, Stathi A, Akira Hino A and Porter MM (2020) Employing participatory citizen science methods to promote age-friendly environments worldwide. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* **17**, 1541.

Lehning AJ and Greenfield EA (2017) Research on age-friendly community initiatives: taking stock and moving forward. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly* **31**, 178–192.

Lehning A, Scharlach A and Wolf JP (2012) An emerging typology of community ageing initiatives. *Journal of Community Practice* **20**, 293–316.

Lehning AJ, Smith RJ and Kim K (2017) 'Friendly' initiatives: an emerging approach to improve communities for vulnerable populations. *Journal of Policy Practice* **16**, 46–58.

Liddle J, Scharf T, Bartlam B, Bernard M and Sim J (2014) Exploring the age-friendliness of purpose-built retirement communities: evidence from England. *Ageing & Society* **34**, 1601–1629.

Lui C, Everingham J, Warburton J, Cuthill M and Bartlett H (2009) What makes a community age-friendly: a review of international literature. *Australasian Journal on Ageing* **28**, 116–121.

McBride AM, Gonzales E, Morrow-Howell N and McCrary S (2011) Stipends in volunteer civic service: inclusion, retention, and volunteer benefits. *Public Administration Review* **71**, 850–858.

McGarry P and Morris J (2011) A great place to grow older: a case study of how Manchester is developing an age-friendly city. *Working With Older People* **15**, 38–46.

Menec VH (2017) Conceptualizing social connectivity in the context of age-friendly communities. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly* **31**, 99–116.

Menec V and Brown C (2018) Facilitators and barriers to becoming age-friendly: a review. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*. Available online doi:10.1080/08959420.2018.1528116.

Menec VH, Means R, Keating N, Parkhurst G and Eales J (2011) Conceptualizing age-friendly communities. *Canadian Journal on Ageing* **30**, 479–493.

Menec VH, Novek S, Veselyuk D and McArthur J (2014) Lessons learned from a Canadian province-wide age-friendly initiative: the Age-Friendly Manitoba Initiative. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* **26**, 33–51.

Moulaert T and Garon S (2016) *Age-friendly Cities and Communities in International Comparison*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International.

Novek S and Menec VH (2014) Older adults' perceptions of age-friendly communities in Canada: a photovoice study. *Ageing & Society* **34**, 1052–1072.

Nykiforuk CI, Rawson D, McGetrick JA and Belon AP (2019) Canadian policy perspectives on promoting physical activity across age-friendly communities: lessons for advocacy and action. *Ageing & Society* **39**, 307–339.

Oh P (2015) The age-friendly community movement in Maine. *Maine Policy Review* **24**, 56–59.

Patton MQ (2011) *Essentials of Utilization-focused Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patton M (2015) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th Edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rémillard-Boilard S, Buffel T and Phillipson C (2017) Involving older residents in age-friendly developments: from information to coproduction mechanisms. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly* **31**, 146–159.

Russell E, Skinner MW and Fowler K (2019) Emergent challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly initiatives: qualitative findings from a Canadian age-friendly funding program. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*. Available online doi:10.1080/08959420.2019.1636595.

Saldaña J (2015) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd Edn. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Scharlach AE and Lehning AJ (2016) *Creating Aging-friendly Communities*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Winteron R (2016) Organizational responsibility for age-friendly social participation: views of Australian rural community stakeholders. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* **28**, 261–276.

World Health Organization (WHO) (2018) *The Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities: Looking Back Over the Last Decade, Looking Forward to the Next*. Available at https://www.who.int/ageing/gnafcc-report-2018.pdf.

World Health Organization (WHO) (nd) *Application Form for the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities*. Available at https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/application-form.

Cite this article: Greenfield EA, Reyes L (2022). Characterising older adults' engagement in age-friendly community initiatives: perspectives from core group leaders in the Northeast United States of America. *Ageing & Society* **42**, 1465–1484. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X2000166X