

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Catherine Hagan Hennessy, Robin Means, and Vanessa Burholt, Eds. *Countryside Connections: Older people, Community and Place in Rural Britain*. Bristol, England: Policy Press, 2014

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This book offers an innovative and wide-ranging view of older people's participation in rural community life. The authors' focus on aging in rural communities is an important one. Despite the large proportion of the aging population living in rural settings worldwide, the experiences of older people in rural areas are still relatively under-researched in comparison to their urban counterparts. In addition, as the authors argue, the majority of research on rural aging has viewed older people through a deficit model in which aging is framed as a problem, and older people are assumed to be in need of support. Hennessy et al. do not deny the vulnerability of older people living in changing rural places with changing health and social conditions; however, they advance a shift in gerontological thinking towards acknowledging and examining the contributions of older people in, and to, their communities. Accordingly, the book offers a hopeful perspective on aging in rural places.

Although the book's content focuses mainly on the United Kingdom, its conceptual approach and the issues it addresses have significant relevance in the Canadian context. The nine chapters in the book touch on topics of emerging and longstanding interest in gerontology including social inclusion and exclusion, social support networks, mobility, leisure participation, attachment to place, civic engagement, and availability and access to services. The empirical foundation for the book was a major interdisciplinary research project, Grey and Pleasant Land (GaPL; <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/et/research/cts/researchprojects/mobilityandtheaged/greyandpleasantland.aspx>), which brought together researchers from the social sciences, visual and performative arts, transport studies, museum and heritage studies, and a range of other disciplines (see chapter 1). Given that pedigree, *Countryside Connections* is suitable for a broad audience. To integrate diverse disciplinary perspectives and aging issues, the authors introduce "connectivity" as a "heuristic metaphor" and unifying concept. They define connectivity as "the link between individuals, groups or objects through some pattern, process or structure" (p. 250). Although their definition of connectivity is vague, the authors provide a comprehensive relational framework for exploring

the network of factors shaping and being shaped by older people's engagement in rural communities over time. In doing so, they contribute to the growing interest in relational approaches in environmental and geographical gerontology. Chapter 2 details a conceptual model for connectivity, drawing on both social capital and critical human ecology approaches. This model provides a foundation for the more thematic chapters in the remainder of the book, which focus on socio-cultural, environmental, and creative connectivity.

Chapters 3 to 8 combine extensive quantitative data and a range of in-depth qualitative and arts-based methods to explore broader trends, factors, and meanings of participation. Chapter 3 focuses on leisure participation, a growing area of interest in rural aging research and gerontology more broadly. The chapter examines older people's participation in a wide range of home-based, informal, and community activities. The authors note that many of the activities older rural people are engaged in are not necessarily formal or particularly social. Through the use of qualitative methods, they unpack the importance in older people's lives of informal activities such as country walks, making crafts, and cooking. The authors demonstrate how everyday and lifelong activities can foster attachment to place and a sense of social cohesion as well as how older people adapt their activities over time. Furthermore, they illustrate the potential role of research in developing greater social cohesion by creating a community oral history project that connects children in primary schools with older people in their communities.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore facets of environmental connectivity. Chapter 4 examines the predictors of, and pathways to, place attachment through the development of quantitative models while chapter 6 explores experiences of place through deep mapping. In chapter 5, the authors examine older people's mobility beyond the traditional transport planning focus. The chapter provides evidence of the increasing virtual mobility of an aging rural population. The authors caution, however, that the increasing popularity of the Internet as a means of connecting to family, friends,

goods, and services means that those who are not able to follow this trend may be even more vulnerable. They also provide evidence of the potential of imaginative mobility as a means of enhancing the lives of older people who are no longer physically mobile. The concepts of imaginative mobility and creative connectivity may be particularly useful for researchers and practitioners working with less physically mobile older adults. However, the term creative connectivity emerges only in the last chapter and needs to be developed more explicitly.

One of the most innovative aspects of the project detailed in the book was the authors' use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to connect older people, health professionals, and academics in synchronous and asynchronous discussions (see chapter 8). Although digital methods have become increasingly popular across a range of disciplines, it is too often assumed that such methods would not work well with older people, particularly in rural places. The authors acknowledge that ICT is not an inclusive methodology for research nor is it an inclusive means of service delivery. Nonetheless, they challenge assumptions about older people in rural areas being less willing or able to connect to the Internet. They also provide recommendations for those looking to engage older people through a range of ICT technologies (e.g., listservs, twitter, webinars, etc.). It is to be hoped that the authors' detailed account of their

experiences will encourage other researchers in the field of aging to explore a broader range of digital methods.

As a theoretical framework, connectivity offers researchers and policy makers a way of conceptualizing the activities of older adults beyond service needs and the service landscape. Although one of the major strengths of the GaPL study was its use of community-based participatory methods, there is little discussion of what their findings and approach to rural connectivity contributed to, or gained from, health professionals in the project. *Countryside Connections* focuses more on research, policy, and community development than it does on the potential of connectivity for health and health workers. The authors also direct little attention to issues of alienation and exclusion. Chapter 7 provides some insights and poignant policy recommendations with regard to the significance of community infrastructure and voluntary welfare service for low-income older people; however, there is limited attention to other factors producing vulnerability (e.g., gender, race, and sexuality). How do intersecting identities create barriers and opportunities for connectivity in older rural people's lives and in different types of rural places? To be sure, concepts such as diversity and vulnerability manifest themselves differently in different jurisdictions. The conceptual model, innovative methods, and empirics presented in this book provide a rich foundation for studies in other rural places.