

## Introduction: Intergenerational relationships in rural areas

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It has taken gerontologists a long time to focus on the problems of rurality. More than half the older people in the world live in rural areas. The proportions of older people in local populations are higher in rural areas than in urban areas in most countries of the world. However, it was not until the year 2000 that the First Global Rural Ageing Conference was held. This special issue looks at intergenerational relationships in rural areas and stems from an invited symposium at that conference.

This issue presents six papers from countries around the world. It includes two papers from Europe, two from the New World and two from developing countries. This represents a wide range of cultural and environmental variation as well as some underlying similarities associated with life in rural areas. The papers represent a cross-section of perspectives, approaches and methodologies. They all deal in one way or another with the expectations which accrue to intergenerational relationships and with family networks of support. They all deal with the effects of migration. Implicitly they are all about regional differences between rural and urban areas. Most discuss property, land-holding and inheritance. All the papers represent accounts of how families and generations adapt to the social and economic pressures surrounding them.

In most Western countries, older parents tend not to co-reside with their adult children and often live at a considerable distance from them. This is often interpreted to mean that intergenerational ties are in decline and that older parents are isolated from their children (Parsons 1944; United Nations 1971; Popenoe 1993). The dispersion of the family seems to be correlated with levels of economic development. Even within Europe the experience of ageing in rural areas demonstrates a wide range of variation (Burholt and Scharf 1999; Scharf *et al.* 1999a, b; Wenger *et al.* 1999). Adult children are much more likely to live near to their parents in Eastern and Southern Europe than in Northern and Western Europe (Hollinger and Haller

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1990), although some areas of rural Germany have high proportions of three-generation households (Wenger *et al.* 1999 and Scharf in this issue). In the richer countries of the new world, family dispersal is greater.

The first two papers by Scharf and by Wenger and Burholt discuss the situations in Germany and Wales. Scharf's paper takes a broad overview of ageing in rural Germany based on an analysis of the literature and findings from a comparative study of six European countries. His ability to review the German language literature makes the important research point that those of us who work only in English can only be seen as doing partial surveys of what has been written. He starts out by putting rural research in context and discusses the problems associated with conducting research in rural as opposed to urban areas; for example, the dearth of disaggregated statistics. This is a useful discussion and applies to rural research in all countries. The paper takes a structural approach, identifying the characteristics of households, proximity to relatives, frequency of contact, inter-generational transfers and non-kin relationships. Variation between national regions is found to be marked. However overall, in contrast with urban areas of Germany, the rural areas have more three-generation households and most family members live within two hours travelling distance of each other (which is closer than in urban areas), but older people place high value on independence from their children.

The paper by Wenger and Burholt presents longitudinal data from the Bangor Longitudinal Study of Ageing, which followed people over 20 years. It identifies four types of family structure that have been influenced by the rural environment. It looks at the importance of land-holding and education and the ways in which these factors impact on families. The children of people in families without land are more likely to migrate to urban areas. Better off people are more likely to move to rural areas as they approach or reach retirement. The point is made that those with higher incomes and transferable skills are more likely to live in rural areas from choice, while others are tied to the rural milieu by the nature of their occupations. The size of the local labour force can force younger people to leave to find work in more populated areas. Here too older people place a high value on independence from their children.

The next two papers by Shenk on rural Minnesota in the USA and Keeling on the South Island of New Zealand represent the new world. In both countries, the pioneer generations of colonists live on in the memories of the oldest generations of the present. Rural population density is considerably lower than in Europe and rural communities

tend to be more isolated. The outmigration of younger people tends to be more marked.

Shenk uses a lifecourse perspective and qualitative data to explore the support systems of women in central Minnesota – an area subject to rural depopulation. She presents three case studies that demonstrate a wide range of situations. What is clear in this paper is the fact that decisions about care in old age are made by negotiation within the family depending on their particular circumstances, values, resources and coping strategies. The women featured tend to refer to earlier days in which they believe families were closer and children looked after parents. They feel that children should be responsible for their old parents but at the same time set limits on what they expect from their children in the context of modern pressures. They also demonstrate a pioneer spirit of independence and recognise that times and rural communities have changed and they do not want to be a burden to their children.

Keeling's paper explores family and geographic distance based on a study of one community in the South Island of New Zealand, which also experiences rural depopulation. There are parallels with Shenk's paper inasmuch as a certain pioneer spirit survives. Distances from children are greater than in the European papers above. The older people employ a number of devices to enhance social support in this context. Mutual support is important, relationships with extended kin may be fostered more frequently and relationships may be developed with kin or friends or friends of kin.

From the Middle East to the Pacific, the typical residence pattern is for sons to marry and bring their wives to the parental home on marriage, while daughters leave their parents' home on marriage. The three-generation household is a widespread norm in most of these countries and much of Africa. These living arrangements are often interpreted as providing guaranteed care for ageing parents, but this is not always the case, particularly in the context of poverty. However, traditional family forms are undergoing rapid change in the developing world in the face of economic development, rising standards of living and increasing longevity. The rapidity of social change is exacerbated by the far more rapid ageing of the populations of developing countries compared with the virtually completed process in the developed world.

The two final papers relate to developing countries. The first, by Kumari and Dhruvarajan, discusses the changing situation in India. The second, by Keasbury, reports on a community study in Indonesia. While the first takes a broad national perspective, the second focuses on the experiences of respondents to a survey in one region in Java. In

contrast with the Western countries discussed in the four previous papers neither of these countries has a developed system of health and social care. Both papers explore the social and economic pressures that impinge on intergenerational relationships.

The Indian population is ageing very rapidly. Kumari and Dhruvarajan make the point that in India to speak of ageing is to speak of rural ageing, since 80 per cent of the population of India live in rural areas. Their paper reviews the literature on ageing in India, including material published in India and perhaps less accessible to Western authors. The authors see older people as caught between the decline in traditional family values and the absence of an adequate social security system. In the absence of formal services, they suggest, this means that the situation of older people is deteriorating. However, the health and quality of life of older people in rural areas is better than in urban areas.

In Indonesia too, the intergenerational family is important for elder care. In the region where the study was conducted, the predominant three-generation household was typically based on co-residence with daughters rather than with sons as in India. Keasbury compared the situation in two villages. She hypothesised that the poorer village would experience greater push factors for depopulation and that as younger people moved to urban areas more older people would be left without family support. She found that, despite the interdependence of the joint household, the older people placed a high value on continued physical independence and reciprocal contribution to the running of the household. Most did not need help, despite the fact that most still lived close to at least some of their children. More traditional social patterns persisted in the poorer, more remote village, but there was in fact less out-migration. The older people in both villages were well supported by their children.

So what generalisations can be made about rural ageing? So far the literature has tended to concentrate on ageing in the rural areas of one particular country (see Kim 1985; Rowles 1988; Keating 1991; Coward and Krout 1998; Wenger 2001). Comparisons have tended to be between countries within one culture area (Hollinger and Haller 1990, Burholt and Scharf 1999, Scharf *et al.* 1999a, b). Recently, I wrote a paper on rural ageing in Britain (2001). That paper listed a number of factors associated with rural ageing in my own country. Compared with urban areas in Britain, these included environmental factors such as clean air, lower crime rates, less crowded facilities, lower traffic volumes and lower insurance rates. Family support was found to be comparable in both urban and rural areas, but rural elders seem to be better integrated into small-scale communities.

On the other hand, formal health and social care services can be problematic. Rural deprivation (in terms of a small labour market and lower earnings) leading to out-migration of younger people was acknowledged. Social marginalisation as a result of distance, lack of transport and absence of cultural and social amenities (including secondary and specialist health care) was also recognised. Are these findings evident in any of the papers in this issue?

Urbanisation (and rural depopulation) has been linked with family diaspora. In all countries, young adults tend to leave rural areas to seek work in urban areas leaving their parents behind. In the richer countries, older people, who may have lived all their lives in an urban area, move to more rural or seaside communities on retirement (*e.g.* Karn 1977; Rees 1992; Warnes 1994; Burholt 1998). Geographical dispersal of the family can be mitigated, however, by return migration of people to their rural communities on retirement or as growing dependency increases their need for family support (Feinstein and McFadden 1989; Silverstein 1995).

In Western countries, despite family dispersion, intergenerational solidarity (intimacy, continued contact, exchange of services) is maintained (Silverstein and Litwak 1993; Warnes 1994). This type of family, typified as 'intimacy at a distance', has been recognised as an ideal intergenerational family structure, which meets the needs of dependent family members and the demands of modern economies for a mobile labour force (Litwak 1985). This type of family structure is becoming more and more common in developing countries also. The *ideal types* of rural society (Tonnie 1955; Weber 1978) are those where kinship groups are bound together by territorial tribalism, economic interdependence and unquestioned family solidarity. Urban societies, in contrast, have been characterised by diffuse ties, geographic separation and independence between the generations (Goode 1970). However, this dichotomy is no longer valid in the context of rapid social change.

All the papers feature migration as a central aspect of discussion. The economic base of rural society, and the exploitation of rural areas by wealthy urban interests and value systems would appear to be a basic pre-condition of most rural areas (Caldock 1992; Coward and Krout 1998; Hartmann & Boyce 1990). The economic disadvantage of rural areas is the main push factor for rural depopulation. Attitudes to living in rural areas, however, tend to be culture specific. In much of Western Europe, life in the country is viewed positively and retirement migration is not uncommon. The same is true in some less remote areas in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand

and the United States. Where national infrastructures are poorly developed, however, as in the developing countries, where rural life means no electricity, no adequate water supply, no paved roads, poor education, little or no professional health care and/or lawlessness, life in rural areas is perceived as disadvantaged and deprived.

The basic economic disadvantage and pressures for migration seem to be common to all rural areas despite differences in degree. In the most developed countries, the rural community is losing significance as an economic and social nexus while its importance as a cultural and political entity may be increasing (Wenger *et al.* 1999). Even in countries, such as India, where the majority of the national population lives in the countryside, the power of urban areas is disproportionate, and rural areas are disadvantaged in terms of access to economic and political power.

Rural family values have been identified as stronger in rural areas. People who have been raised in US rural communities, especially on farms, have been identified as having stronger ties between ageing parents and adult children (Lee *et al.* 1994). The stronger feelings of responsibility to old parents in rural areas have been attributed to the power and social capital that land ownership and control confers on the older people (Salamon and Lockhart 1980; Nydegger 1983). Several studies in the Southern US found that parents placed obligations for old age support on their children in return for allowing them to settle on their land (Grogger 1992). It may be assumed that this is also implicit in other rural communities. In other countries, such obligations are part of the cultural expectations of society and do not need to be made explicit.

The importance of land-holding comes out clearly in the papers on Germany, the USA and Wales. The paper on Wales perhaps makes the point most strongly, showing how the social capital of owning farms, or other rural businesses, appears to keep the extended family together. This is implicit in other papers. The relationship between rural land-holding and family care in old age suggests itself as an area for further research.

Throughout Europe (Keilman 1987) and the developing countries (as discussed in papers in this issue) the proportions of three-generation and extended family households are decreasing and the proportions of people living alone are increasing. In Europe, most older people live in one-generation households and while they are in good health this is the preferred living arrangement (Scharf 1995). As noted above, married children are more likely to live with their parents in some European countries than others (Hollinger and Haller 1990) and one recent study

comparing rural areas found that the proportion is lowest in the United Kingdom (Wenger *et al.* 1999). Married children are also less likely to live near their parents in North than in East and South European countries (Tornstam 1992). In the developing nations the three-generation family remains the norm but there is evidence that as economic conditions improve, older couples prefer to live separately but near to their children (personal communication Luis Ramos, Brazil). My own research experience in village India indicates that those older people receiving remittances from sons living abroad would prefer to remain alone in their home village, where they enjoy a relatively high standard of living, than to live abroad with their adult children.

In post-industrial nations there is evidence of growing differentiation between older people with low incomes and those with high incomes, which is often more pronounced in rural areas. Those with low incomes tend to be those who have always lived there, and those with high incomes are those who move into the countryside, often from urban areas, seeking a better living environment. The paper on Wales shows that the lifestyles of those with higher incomes are more likely to be associated with migration over the life-cycle and greater distance from children. There may be little social exchange between the local and incomer sectors of rural society (Gibbins 1984). As mentioned above, the parents of emigrants frequently have a better lifestyle than their neighbours whose children remain nearby. Assumptions of homogeneity in rural communities may, therefore, be ill-founded.

The greater integration of older people in small-scale communities identified as an advantageous feature of rural ageing in Britain (Wenger 2001) appears to be supported by data from the other countries presented in this issue. The importance of friends and neighbours is evident in the papers from Germany, Wales, the USA and New Zealand. Earlier work, however, has shown that even between European countries, the importance of non-kin varies (Wenger *et al.* 1999). Neighbours and friends were found to be more important in countries where families of procreation were smaller. The papers from India and Indonesia in this issue suggest that on the whole older people are healthier and have a better quality of life in rural communities than their peers in urban areas. The same has been observed in a recent study in Bangladesh (Kabir *et al.* 1998).

It seems fair to conclude that there are sufficient similarities across cultural and national boundaries to make the study of rural ageing a discrete field of endeavour. Despite the differences in geography and culture represented in these few papers, readers will be able to identify

recurring themes. Some of these are explained in terms of structural factors of the rural-urban divide and the economic power concentrated in urban centres. Some authors interpret the commitment of most families to negotiate relationships to provide for the needs of the different generations in terms of specific cultural or religious values, but what comes across clearly is that intergenerational relationships are recognised as significant in all the countries discussed here. Social change and family economic circumstances may make it more difficult for individuals to live up to ideal behaviour, but the goal of intergenerational responsibility as a reciprocal norm is evident in all the papers.

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