



# Localism and decision-making in regional Australia: The power of people like us



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## ABSTRACT

A number of conceptual issues problematize the idea that community adaptability in rural communities is simply a matter of community-based problem solving. In particular, this perspective takes for granted an inclusive, participative community decision-making process and in doing so ignores theoretical and practical research that has focused on issues of connectivity, and the exercise of power within decision-making processes. In this paper we bring to bear insights from Granovetter (the importance of loose social ties in decision making) and Foucault (that power can be exercised in unison by seemingly competing parties) on community decision-making processes utilising quantitative data from a large community-based Australian sample ( $n = 2000$ ). The survey utilised existing, validated research tools for assessing wellbeing, adaptive capacity, community connectivity and satisfaction with decision-making. Our research found that one group in particular (the good lifers representing 45% of the sample) strongly believed that they were able to influence the policy decision-making process, even to control it, and that they were very satisfied with the outcomes of the decision-making process. Through these data we were able to demonstrate that these people, despite representing different interests and views in the community, did have loose and frequent social connections and were able to influence decision-making. By contrast, the remaining 55% of the community saw themselves as doing poorly in terms of both policy-relevant decision-making and subsequent social (and other) outcomes. This study brings out the insight that it is important therefore to understand 'who' is involved in community decision-making rather than simply focusing on the 'how' consultation occurred or 'how many' people participated.

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## 1. Introduction

Without doubt, the evidence demonstrates that rural communities in western economies are in decline (OECD, 2009). Coupled with the additional pressures wrought by climate change and the global financial crisis, the capacity of local communities to adapt, economically, socially and environmentally has been a primary concern amongst researchers and affected communities (see for example Pielke, 1998; Gunderson, 2000; Scheffer et al., 2000; Berkes and Folke, 2002; Adger et al., 2005; Folke et al., 2005; Grothmann and Patt, 2005; Gallopin, 2006; Nelson et al., 2007; Parry et al., 2007; Daffara et al., 2010). The focus of such research is often concerned with the capitals, as they have been called – natural resources, economic capital and social capital (which can

also be referred as resilience or personal adaptive capacity) (Wall and Marzall, 2006; Harrison et al., 2016; McManus et al., 2012; Glover, 2012; Bahadur et al., 2010; Skerratt, 2013; Houston, 2015). However, a naïve capitals approach to adaptability, particularly social adaptability is problematic. First, and on a practical basis, a focus on capitals has been problematized by the finding that little difference may exist in the capacity of westernised rural communities to be resilient in the face of substantive externally driven change (Hogan and Young, 2013; Hogan et al., 2015). In addition, such an approach assumes some level of equity in the asset-base across rural communities and thus implies an inherent capacity for self-sufficiency, when in reality not all rural communities are equally endowed across the capitals (Hogan and Lockie, 2013). As such, rural community economic self-sufficiency is greatly facilitated by access to resources or industry (see for example Hogan et al., 2014; Cockfield, 2015; Smith and Pritchard, 2015). This approach is further problematized because it can infer that adaptability is a matter of personal motivation and as such, it

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ignores the systemic factors that may be at play in a given rural community. Second, we readily identify significant conceptual problems with the idea that community adaptability is simply a matter of community-based problem solving – it is theoretically functionalist in nature (Parsons and Smelser, 1956); it focuses on the 'how' or 'how many' of decision-making not the 'who', ignoring substantive work that has focused on connectivity and decision-making (Granovetter 1973, 1983; 2005); and it ignores the theoretical insight that power may be exercised by collective interests rather than being the possession of distinct individuals or institutions (Foucault, 1988). These issues are briefly addressed in turn below.

From a sociological perspective a functionalist approach to community decision making has been around since the 1950s. This framework centred on the capacity of a community to use its local economy (specifically land, labour and capital (Holton, 1992)) as its adaptive base for addressing the needs and wants of the community. To enable this to happen, the model (Parsons and Smelser, 1956) proposed that a community would identify its goals, and subsequently organise their values and social processes in such a manner so as to enable the realisation of these goals which reflect the needs of the entire community. And in so doing, they would deploy strategies to manage social conflict since any dissention would be minor and unrepresentative of the community in general; community goals would be realised and everyone would be happy. Walsh-Dilley et al. (2013), however, raise the concern about the adequacy processes such as these give to the rights, power and agency of local people in decision-making processes. The core limitation of the functionalist approach is that it pays no attention to the fact that power may be at play within these community processes and that such power is not equally distributed among community members. This perspective has been in the literature for a long time. This concern is heightened by the fact that localism (Evans et al., 2013) has become a significant part of international political discourse, as a byword for the supposed devolution of power and decision-making to grassroots communities (Shucksmith and Talbot, 2015).

While significant attention has been focused on the nature, process and efficacy of various forms of participative decision making, far less attention has been paid to who actually gets to influence local decision making processes and the interests that such individuals bring to the table. In whose interests do they actually act? Mark Granovetter (1973, 1983; 2005) has been highly cited for his insight that those who successfully span different (endogenous and exogenous) networks through 'weak' or bridging ties are more likely to have access to a greater range of resources spanning human, financial and institutional domains. As such, these individuals tend to be influencers and are thus more likely to wield power in local decision-making. This approach differs from the idea that decision-making power may be concentrated in the hands of a few elites (Holton, 1992; Piketty, 2014). A Foucauldian (1988) approach to power may provide further insight into Granovetter's perspective by arguing that rather than necessarily being the unique possession of a privileged group, power is exercised by people (including community opinion leaders) and groups who seek similar ends around common points of interest. And while these interests do not always share a common value base, they can share interest in securing a specific social outcome.

Theoretically and practically, we have then problematized the adequacy of some approaches to community decision-making in rural communities that are becoming increasingly popular. Taking this work into account it would appear that localised community decision-making is not as unproblematic as it may be presented to be; that it is feasible that some people, who appear to share some form of social connection, have a greater say in decisions than

others and that as a result, some members within the community will be more pleased with outcomes of decision-making than others. This paper examines these conceptual issues surrounding the adequacy of community-decision making in rural communities by drawing upon research conducted between 2011 and 2014 that was aimed at understanding the capacity of rural Australian communities to adapt to a multitude of change drivers, including externalities such as global economic pressures; environmental concerns and changing demographics.

## 2. Methods

The full methodology used for this study is detailed in Hogan and Young (2013). The study is based on a stratified sample of 2000 residents in the north (30%), upper middle (46%) and south (24%) of Australia's Murray Darling Basin (commonly referred to as Australia's food bowl) (See Fig. 1) who were surveyed with regard to their adaptive capacity and wellbeing. These communities were of interest because they have been impacted by significant water, drought, flood, and fire events as well as the impact of global economic pressures impacting on prices of products produced there. The sampling was based on earlier community studies (see Ipsos, 2007) undertaken by the Cotton Catchment Communities Cooperative Research Centre. To reflect this methodology, the study sought to recruit primary producers, hobby farmers (property owners with sales of agricultural produce of less than \$5000 per annum) town residents and change agents. Table 1 shows that our recruitment was successful with only small variances arising between the targeted and actual sample achieved.

Survey items addressed individual and collective adaptive capacity, community connectivity, social capital, subjective wellbeing and perceptions of the condition of natural resources. Descriptive data were also collected. In particular, respondents were asked to rate their agreement on several questions related to being able to have a say in public policy development if they wished to do so: *Anyone can easily participate in decision making in this area if they want to* and *Country people are having a fair say in the development of rural and regional policy in Australia*. The various survey questions were analysed within a factor cluster analysis procedure using derived summary scales for individual adaptive capacity, community connectivity, social capital and subjective wellbeing. Collective adaptive capacity and perceptions of the condition of natural resources items were not subjected to the data reduction routine but were retained in their original form so that they could be examined in the context of the research question of interest to this study: that is, that some groups within a community may have a greater say over decision-making processes than others.

Data analysis involved cluster analysis. This analytical procedure is a descriptive, theory driven, analytical technique that is used purposively to investigate a question of interest. In this instance, this was the interests of, and satisfaction expressed by members within observed clusters, with regard to policy-related decision-making in their communities. The analysis followed the two-step procedure laid out in the SPSS manual; i.e. a hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted on the data with the resulting coefficients reported in an agglomeration schedule which was in turn plotted and visually inspected for cluster groupings. The visual inspection of the dot plot suggested four clusters were evident in the data. The K Means cluster procedure was then utilised, with four clusters specified for the solution. This procedure then grouped respondents into four groups, putting those who were most alike with regards the attributes of interest, into the same cluster grouping. These clusters are then named on the basis of the strongest positive or negative results that arose during the analysis. The analysis itself utilises standardised Z scores. As such, a score of

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