



A far greater sense of community: The impact of volunteer behaviour on the wellness of rural older Australians

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on place-based research investigating the transformative potential of volunteering for service-deprived, ageing rural communities. Here, we critically explore the relationship between communities of place, voluntarism and wellness for rural older Australians. We draw on data from a large qualitative multi-site study, and utilise Ryan et al.'s (2005) systemic model of community attachment. Findings support the dual perspective of strong community sentiments through social embeddedness in rural communities; and personal interests, associated with rational choice theory, through healthy ageing practices. Both aspects have demonstrated positive impact on wellness, but also risks to wellness associated with over-expectations of volunteers.

1. Introduction and background

Drawing on data from a large, multi-site qualitative study conducted in Australia, this research critically explores the role of voluntarism in influencing rural older adults' wellness. In the context of globally increasing rates of rural population ageing (Flora, 1998; Hennessy, Means and Burholt, 2014; United Nations, 2009), and growing acknowledgment of the importance of rural environmental contexts in influencing the experience of older age (Annear et al., 2012; Keating and Phillips, 2008; Warburton et al., 2016; Winterton et al., 2016), the question of how older adults can remain healthy within rural settings is attracting significant attention. Contemporary policy approaches to understanding health in older age are emphasising a wellness paradigm (World Health Organization, 2002). This approach moves beyond health as representative of illness and functional limitations, to emphasise wellness as the ability of individuals to achieve their potential (physically, psychologically, socially, spiritually and economically), and to fulfil role expectations in the family or community (Smith, Tang and Nutbeam, 2006).

Geographers have consistently highlighted the importance of understanding volunteering in the context of health, wellbeing and place (for a summary, see Skinner and Power, 2011), and in light of these contemporary definitions relating to wellness, understanding the intersection of voluntarism and wellness for older adults residing in rural settings is critical. Rural contexts present many challenges in relation to growing older, including limited health and social care services, higher rates of morbidity and mortality, geographical and social isolation, and economic disadvantage (Dobson et al., 2010;

Glasgow and Brown, 2012; Keating et al., 2011; Milbourne, 2012; Winterton and Warburton, 2011). In this context, rural older people are often described as “vulnerable people in vulnerable places” (Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher, 2005), as they are simultaneously prone to health and mobility issues associated with ageing, as well as disadvantages associated with rural living (Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher, 2005; Wakeman, 2008). Many of these rural disadvantages were prompted by the advent of rural economic restructuring from the 1980s, and the subsequent adoption of neoliberal policy ideologies as a means of improving economic competitiveness (Cheshire and Lawrence, 2005). For rural communities, this has led to decreased state intervention in relation to service provision, while simultaneously placing increased emphasis on communities to develop ‘self-help’ strategies based around active citizenship and voluntarism (Woods, 2006). Consequently, rural communities are experiencing a growing reliance on volunteers to replace reduced state services and to maintain rural community sustainability (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Skinner, 2008; Winterton and Warburton, 2014; Woods, 2006), with the literature reporting higher levels of volunteering and social capital in rural areas (Fast, de Jong Gierveld and Keating, 2008; Liu and Besser, 2003; Winterton and Warburton, 2014). Both high levels of social capital and volunteering are typically presented as a panacea for communities, enhancing their ability to improve the lives of residents (Lovell, 2009). Rurality makes a critical difference here (Skinner, 2014; Skinner and Hanlon, 2016), particularly in the context of service centralisation and withdrawal (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Hardill and O'Dwyer, 2011), and where high levels of volunteering have the potential to enhance the resilience and adaptability of rural places (Scott, 2013).

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However, given the current rates of rural population ageing, responsibility for rural volunteering is increasingly falling to older adults (Liu and Besser, 2003), with a somewhat implicit expectation that rural residents will be involved in voluntary activity (Cheshire and Woods, 2009). Voluntarism can be viewed as having transformative potential for ageing individuals and their communities, which can shape the experience of growing old in place (Joseph and Skinner, 2012; Skinner, 2014). In rural communities, voluntary activity is often facilitated by place attachment, potentially contributing to older people's wellness through facilitating connections with place. Geographical studies have highlighted the intersection between voluntarism and the development of place identity and integration (Hanlon et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2012; Wiles and Jayasinha, 2013), with these place connections identified as significant to the wellbeing of older adults (Walsh et al., 2012; Winterton and Warburton, 2012). However, there is an emergent body of literature that highlights a growing inability or desire of rural older adults to be involved in voluntarism, due to poor health, lifestyle or family commitments (Alston, 2002; Jones and Heley, 2016; Winterton and Warburton, 2014). Given the existing reliance of rural communities on volunteer labour to sustain critical services (Walsh and O'Shea, 2008; Warburton et al., 2016; Winterton et al., 2016), fewer older volunteers may impact the availability of much-needed services and supports to ensure rural older people's wellness. This poses significant risks to health and social inclusion (Barnes et al., 2006; Winterton and Warburton, 2016), indicating that older adults' wellness in rural areas may be influenced by both their own volunteer behaviour, and those of others in their community.

What is missing from this literature, however, is a critical examination of how voluntarism, rural service provision and place attachment intersect to facilitate wellness for rural older adults. Whilst there is a strong body of literature focusing on the health benefits of volunteering in later life (e.g. Greenfield and Marks, 2004; Warburton, 2006), very little of this has adopted a place-based approach. The limited literature that has focused on rurality as a context for ageing and volunteering has explored the implications for rural community sustainability, rather than the health and quality of life implications for older residents (Jones and Heley, 2016; Walsh and O'Shea, 2008). In an era where both rural development and healthy ageing policy discourses are simultaneously touting the benefits of voluntarism, it is important to know more about how rural older people themselves view volunteering in terms of their wellness. Understanding this phenomenon is particularly significant in relation to the increasing diversity of rural places, and the older adults who reside there (Keating, Swindle and Fletcher, 2011). In a recent study, Skinner and Winterton (2017) highlight the potential of voluntarism to contribute to contested spaces of rural ageing, through prompting conflict between older adults, governments and communities, which will have differential outcomes for older adults and rural places. In light of the association between rural voluntarism and relationships with place, it is pertinent to explore the wider impact of voluntarism in rural communities on older adult wellness. To do so, we draw on Ryan et al. (2005) voluntary participation model, which is outlined in the subsequent section.

2. Theoretical framework

Volunteer behaviour, and particularly motivation to volunteer, has been a topic of intense research interest since the 1950s. A review of this literature (Einolf and Chambré, 2011) summarises it in terms of three major theoretical perspectives. Sociological theories stress the importance of social context; while prosocial value orientation theories focus on individual beliefs and the interaction between altruism and self-interest; and finally, resource theories focus on economic factors. Using a comparative predictive model to test these theories, this work concludes that sociological factors best predict volunteer behaviour.

Consequently, we draw on a sociological approach to explore the intersection between communities of place, voluntarism and wellness. While volunteering traditionally encompasses some level of collective

action (Wilson and Musick, 1997), Bell (1998) highlights the essential paradox of volunteering, in that “one of the most striking features of social life is how we often do not act in our own interests when we act in our own interests” (p. 182). He argues that collective action is most likely when there is both a solidarity of interests as well as a solidarity of sentiments to tie us together, with trust as the essential glue between them. It is the dialogue between them that creates social capital (Bell, 1998). Of particular relevance to rural settings, Flora (1998) discusses social capital in relation to communities of place, where residents seek to enhance community wellbeing, highlighting the importance of social structure in comparison with agency. In this context, Flora (1998) suggests that to understand volunteer behaviour in rural settings it is important to explore two potentially divergent themes – social embeddedness and rational choice.

Ryan et al. (2005) utilise these arguments to develop a systemic model of community attachment by combining the tenets of social embeddedness and rational choice theories. They argue that rather than being just attached to individuals, people are connected to a community of place, with volunteering a function of community attachment. Both interests and sentiments are important due to the predominance of strong ties in rural areas. First, volunteer behaviour can be viewed in terms of the social relations within which volunteers are embedded. Similar experiences and repetitive social interactions form strong community sentiments, which in turn influence behaviours such as volunteering. As Granovetter (1985) notes, volunteering is influenced by both formal and informal social ties, and thus, it is argued, has a special role in the formation of social capital (Onyx, Leonard and Hayward-Brown, 2003). This is particularly the case in embedded rural communities, where there is a strong shared identity (Winterton and Warburton, 2012), and where community participation and attachment have particular significance (Stern and Adams, 2010).

The second element of the model is rational choice. Volunteer behaviour occurs whenever the market value exceeds remuneration, a seemingly illogical outcome. Yet, Ryan et al. (2005) argue that such behaviour can be understood by drawing on neo-classical rational choice theory, albeit a weakened version which relaxes the assumption that voluntary acts are solely based on one's immediate self-interests. Thus, individuals may volunteer for business advantage or because they feel volunteering is the right thing to do, the latter being particularly the case in small rural communities where norms favour volunteer behaviour. Thus, as Bell (1998) argues, there may be ego rewards with volunteering based on a solidarity of personal interests.

Ryan et al. (2005) argue that neither rational choice theory nor social embeddedness alone accounts for volunteer behaviour, but it is instead a comingling effect of personal interests and social embeddedness. They suggest that volunteer behaviour can be theorised through both a solidarity of interests – volunteers pursuing personal interests while respecting the interests of others – and a solidarity of sentiment, where there are sentimental ties of affection and commitment to others. Neither is enough alone.

In the present paper, we draw on the theoretical perspective of the model presented in Ryan et al. (2005), and based on attachment to communities of place (Flora, 1998). Specifically, we draw on both solidarity of interests and solidarity of sentiments as a heuristic framework to understand the complexities of how volunteer behaviour influences the wellness of rural, older people. This reflects both how volunteering influences the wellness of older people as volunteers, as well as how community-level volunteer behaviour influences the individual wellness of other older people.

Thus, we aim here to make two contributions to knowledge. First, prior empirical literature using this model relates to social capital across the lifespan and adopts a large-scale quantitative perspective (Ryan et al., 2005; Stern and Adams, 2010). The present paper incorporates a qualitative in-depth approach allowing the researchers to focus more specifically on volunteer behaviour than social capital, and to move beyond established variables and explore meaning

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