Place integration through efforts to support healthy aging in resource frontier communities: The role of voluntary sector leadership

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ABSTRACT

Resource-dependent communities in hinterland regions of Australia, Canada and elsewhere are rapidly aging, yet many features that distinguish them (e.g., geographic remoteness, small populations, infrastructure built with younger persons in mind) also pose significant challenges for healthy aging. These challenges can lead to substantial gaps in access to formal health and social services, with negative implications for older residents aging-in-place and the development aspirations of resource frontier communities. In this paper, we explore the efforts of voluntary sector leaders to transform resource communities into more livable and supportive places for older adults. We offer a case study of two small towns in Canada's aging resource frontier; one forestry-dependent and the other dependent on coal mining. Our findings suggest that place integration develops through volunteer work and explains how voluntarism works as both a process and outcome of 'placemaking'. We argue that greater attention to place integration is needed to bring into focus the transformative potential of the voluntary sector in creating supportive and sustainable environments for healthy aging.

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1. Introduction

While population aging is a worldwide phenomenon, the specific conditions of aging populations and the resources mobilized to promote 'healthy aging' among older people, vary from place to place (Andrews and Philips, 2005). It is widely recognized that rural population aging warrants specific attention owing to the challenges of service delivery (e.g., diseconomies of scale, small client base, remoteness from specialist services) in smaller and less densely populated areas (Keating, 2008). Yet, environments of rural aging are diverse (Milbourne, 2012) and care must be taken not to assume that all non-metropolitan places are the same. This paper considers processes of healthy aging in a particular sub-set of rural environments – namely, 'resource-dependent' communities invested in the extraction and primary processing of mineral, energy and forest-based resources. These communities typically developed over the second half of the twentieth century as an integral part of the hinterland industrialization and modernization schemes prevalent in middle and upper income countries of the world (e.g., the Canadian north, Brazilian rainforest, Australian interior). The growth and increasing spatial concentration of infrastructure and population that accompanied hinterland modernization schemes transformed these spatially marginal regions into 'resource frontiers.'

In Canada, the forestry and mining towns of the resource frontier are a unique sub-set of rural and northern communities that were purpose-built to suit the needs of resource industries and their workers (Randall and Ironside, 1996). The economies of these communities are closely tied to global commodity cycles and, thus, the prospect of economic decline, layoffs and even mill or mine closure is ever present (Bowles, 1992; Markey et al., 2012). In addition, a variety of economically-driven processes, including the increased use of mechanization, long-distance labor commuting (e.g., 'fly in, fly out') and outsourcing have meant that populations in these resource-dependent communities have stagnated or declined in recent decades, in both good times and bad (Beckley, 1995; Halseth et al., 2004; Hayter, 2003; Markey, 2010).

While it has been noted that communities in resource frontier regions are, like those in the agricultural heartland, characterized by rapid population aging (Bryant and Joseph, 2001), little attention has been paid to the particularities of processes underlying such aging or to the ways by which communities cope with absolute and/or relative increases in the number of elderly residents (Hanlon and Halseth, 2005; Skinner et al., in press; Wiersma and Koster, 2013; Winterton and Warburton, 2012). With respect to the processes by which the populations of resource towns become progressively concentrated in older cohorts, we

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regard the labor substitution processes alluded to above as being particularly important. Many mature resource sector workforces are unionized and, over time, locally resident workforces that undergo waves of 'downsizing', driven by short-term business cycles, longer-term shifts in production technology or attitudes toward the use of a fly-in/fly-out workforce, tend to retain workers with seniority (Hanlon and Halseth, 2005). As older workers retire, many experience an equity trap when they seek to sell their homes, as buyers in remote, hinterland locations are usually scarce. Other retirees age-in-place by choice, in spite of the long-held expectation among planners and administrators that they would not remain in a resource-dependent community once they were no longer bound there by employment (Hanlon et al., 2007a). In a sub-set of cases, community leaders have actively sought retirees from larger urban centers to purchase housing considered 'surplus' due to population stagnation and out-migration (Ryser and Halseth, 2013). In such instances, the implicit expectation is that the majority of new resident retirees will have the means to spend their winters in warmer climates (Skinner et al., 2012).

Whatever the particular demographic trajectories, aging resource frontier communities face a number of common challenges (see Halseth and Sullivan, 2002; Mawhiney and Pitblado, 1999; Skinner et al., 2012). The small population sizes and geographical remoteness of many of these places make it difficult to support professional services (e.g., health care, finance, insurance). Likewise, much of the housing in these communities was built for a younger demographic (i.e., workers and their families), and there is often a dearth of housing tailored to the needs of older and (especially) more frail residents. In addition, the amenities available may not be well suited to older people's lifestyles, or else not well oriented to older clients. Substantial gaps in services needed to support healthy aging are therefore commonplace, and these remain in spite of, or perhaps because of, the level of commitment shown by different levels of government and the private sector to accommodate older residents in resource-dependent communities. In many cases, much of the work of making resource frontier communities, and rural communities in general, more 'age-friendly' and conducive to healthy aging falls to the voluntary sector (Halseth and Ryser, 2007; Hanlon et al., 2007b; Joseph and Skinner, 2012; Skinner, 2008; Skinner and Joseph, 2007, 2011; Wiersma and Koster, 2013).

Relatively little attention, however, has been directed towards understanding the evolving role of the voluntary sector in shaping community responses to the challenge of resource frontier aging. An exception is Skinner et al. (in press), who report an exploratory study of the potentially transformative role of voluntarism in Canadian resource towns (see also Giesbrecht et al., 2010; Skinner et al., 2012). In this paper, we extend their work by investigating the efforts of volunteers generally, and voluntary sector leaders in particular, to transform resource communities into more livable, supportive and age-friendly (or healthy) places for older adults. We seek to outline a novel approach to rural aging research that examines processes of place adaptation to aging (Keating et al., 2011, 2013) as expressed *through* active participation in community-based volunteering and voluntary sector development and *within* particular social and cultural place contexts and constraints (Erlinghagen and Hank, 2006; Milligan et al., 2011). In doing so, we hope not only to gain a greater understanding of the local dynamics of voluntarism in aging resource communities but also to probe the mutual constitution of aging, place and voluntarism (see also Skinner, 2014); that is, to inform understanding of place-making on the aging resource frontier.

We begin by reviewing key developments in the health geography literature on voluntarism, aging and place, highlighting the particular importance of 'place integration' (Cutchin, 1997a, 1997b) – *the processes by which individual sense of self becomes intricately bound to place and manifested in a commitment to overcoming the challenges of everyday life* – in guiding our analysis of voluntary sector leadership in aging resource communities. Our empirical focus is on two case studies of resource frontier aging in British Columbia (BC), Canada; the rapidly aging 'gold-rush' turned forestry town of Quesnel (est. 1861) and the coal mining 'instant-town' of Tumbler Ridge (est. 1981). Following an overview of the research design, we present and discuss the findings according to the major themes revealed in in-depth interviews with 15 'community informants' from local governments, businesses and the voluntary sector from each study site ($n=30$). We conclude by reflecting on our approach to understanding the role of leadership in particular, and voluntarism more generally, in creating supportive and sustainable environments for healthy aging on the resource frontier.

2. Voluntarism, healthy aging and place integration

In spite of the many ways in which voluntarism influences the social determinants of health and wellbeing (Milligan, 2007), health geographers have only relatively recently begun to pay more attention to the activities of the voluntary sector and volunteers (see review by Skinner and Power, 2011). 'Voluntarism' refers to the activities of voluntary sector organizations and volunteers, and involves acts done willingly, without expectation of monetary gain, intended to benefit a wider group or network (Smith, 1981). In this sense, it does not include informal care and support offered by family and friends to a loved one, although voluntarism is often considered to be a social extension of caring roles first learned in the family unit (Wilson, 2000; Wuthnow, 1993). The voluntary sector typically is measured by the number of persons and person hours engaged in acts of voluntarism. While these acts are often organized and delivered via non-profit organizations or associations, instances of volunteering also are offered by individuals whose occupations and professions are firmly embedded in the public and private sectors (Hanlon et al., 2011).

The relationship between voluntarism, aging and place is complex. In many ways, voluntarism is a critical response to the local conditions and challenges that are bound up in the nature of particular places (Joseph and Skinner, 2012). In the context of 'healthy aging', the voluntary sector is heavily engaged in delivering services and support for older people (e.g., meals on wheels, volunteer drivers, help with personal care and other instrumental activities of daily living), advocacy (e.g., access to benefits, suitable housing, health care) and providing opportunities for social interaction (e.g., seniors' centers, events) (Milligan, 2001; Rosenberg and Everitt, 2001; Skinner et al., 2013).

The voluntary sector, by its very nature, seeks opportunities to fill gaps in services that have been eschewed or overlooked by market, government and familial providers, and these gaps vary greatly from place to place (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Milligan and Conradson, 2006). Some commentators suggest that local voluntary efforts, especially those addressing the capacity to fill gaps in services and supports for seniors, reinforce rather than challenge prevailing neoliberal approaches to social welfare and community development (e.g., Martinson and Minkler, 2006). At the same time, voluntary activity does offer a vehicle by which situated individuals may potentially challenge or at least mollify the negative impacts of existing social relations and conditions (Hanlon et al., 2007b; Skinner et al., 2013).

Acts of volunteering in particular, and the workings of the voluntary sector more generally, emerge from individual and collective experiences of place (Teather, 1997; Wilson, 2000). In the case of rural, remote and small town environments, service