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## Aging with service, socialization, and support: The work of faith-based stories in a lifetime community



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## ABSTRACT

This project explores the impact that stories told through the church have on rural older adults and their perceptions of community resources, possibilities, and responsibilities as they age in the same small town where they have lived most, if not all, of their lives. I combine qualitative research practices with narrative theorizing to understand the ways in which faith-based stories work with, for, and on community members. I seek to understand how these stories foster a culture of altruism and spirit of stewardship that can ultimately build an inclusive community, nurture a sense of responsibility across generations, and enable residents to age in place with meaningful connection, purpose, and support.

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## Introduction

*God gave you two hands: one to help yourself and one to help others.*

As our population ages in unprecedented number, scholars and policymakers are arguing for imaginative ways to balance the desire for autonomy with the need for connection and support in later life. Greater longevity brings higher potential for a variety of age-related chronic conditions, functional limitations, and cognitive impairments; however, most older adults prefer and are able to live out their lives at home without formal services (Wilson, 2006). These individuals rely on family, friends, neighbors, or local organizations to provide assistance when needed and will typically turn to paid providers only in dire circumstances, such as a significant health event or the loss of a primary caregiver.

Research has established the importance of interdependence characterized by norms of reciprocity, mutual support, and intergenerational relationships for aging in place at home. Indeed, recent studies from this journal alone detail the social connections comprising natural neighborhood networks (Gardner, 2011) and interconnected kinship ties, friendship ties, and neighbor ties (Rittirong, Prasartkul, & Rindfuss, 2014), all of which influence the well-being and quality of life of older residents. These relationships also enable residents of all ages to both provide and receive varying types of support. Importantly, local organizations—and, in particular, faith-based congregations and activities—figure prominently in the creation and maintenance of these social networks (e.g., Gardner, 2011; Heenan, 2010; Rittirong et al., 2014; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013). For these reasons, Baker (2014) prefers the traditional desire to “age in place” be replaced with intentional efforts to “age in community.”

Walter Fisher (1997) argues any study of community must entail two considerations: “the grounds of its constitution and the nature of the communication that provides the forms and fabric of its existence” (p. 319). An analysis of the different communicative practices forging community, therefore, must

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also include an understanding of the values, norms, and expectations shaping those practices. Previous research claims lifetime communities facilitate personal independence as well as the engagement of residents in civic and social life (AARP, 2005; Kochera & Bright, 2006) through relationship-driven service delivery models (Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning, & Davitt, 2012; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). While such research has generally focused on the availability and accessibility of supportive structures (e.g., sidewalks and buildings), services (e.g., transportation and healthcare), and connections (e.g., individuals, associations, and organizations), few studies have considered the narrative realities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) constituting these communities. Given that “the fate of the elderly depends to a large degree on what dominant narratives a culture constructs about the last years of life” (Morris, 1998, p. 236) and “it is not an exaggeration to suggest that community values, norms, and expectations shape the aging experience” (Rowles, 1998, p. 106), an exploration of a community’s storied experiences and storied responses is critical if we are to understand in more detail the underlying foundation for opportunities that exist for older adults to age in place with service, socialization, and support.

Thus, in this paper, I draw from Arthur Frank’s (2010) theoretical framework of socio-narratology to examine the work that stories can do for individuals wanting to grow old in their current community. Frank (2010) claims storytelling and storylistening are moral activities aimed at promoting a good life for both individuals and communities. This focus on the work of stories offers compelling entrée for nuanced and novel understandings of the narrative realities comprising—and therefore helping or hindering—lifetime communities. To examine the work that stories might do, I take as an example the impact that stories told through a rural small town’s churches—deemed by my participants as the focal point of their community—might have on older adults and their perceptions of community resources, possibilities, and responsibilities as they age. My analysis demonstrates how these collective stories work with, for, and on older adults to foster a culture of altruism and spirit of stewardship that can ultimately build an inclusive community, nurture a sense of responsibility across generations, and enable residents to age in place with meaningful connection, purpose, and support (see <http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/2010>).

#### *Aging in community*

Citing aging in place as a “compelling human need,” the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions met in 2006 to examine naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) as a supportive, inventive model for older adults to remain at home in their local community. NORCs are based on the notion that communities should provide services for aging populations to live their lives at home; the ultimate goal of NORC programs is to help transform communities into good places to grow old. Accordingly, the NORC model of care empowers older adults to help shape the type of lifetime community they think will be most supportive to them. It also engages social networks and public–private partnerships to provide a myriad of cost-effective services that can respond with calibrated supports as individual needs change. Most significantly, it recognizes the strengths of and

nurtures the connections among residents, associations, and organizations already present within the local community.

Although AARP (2005) argues for all community types to address and respond to the needs of citizens as they age, policymakers recognize rural environments as especially important settings for the NORC model of care (Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, 2006). In general, older adults living in rural communities face major barriers to long-term care, including lack of providers, limited knowledge of available resources, isolation, socioeconomic factors, lack of availability and coordination of services, and the rural culture itself (Hutchison, Hawes, & Williams, 2005; Krout, 1998). Still, they have often lived in their communities for most, if not all, of their lives; successfully draw on a variety of informal supports when needed, including family, churches, and neighbors; and, to some degree, are the backbone of these settings (Krout, 1998; McLaughlin & Jensen, 1998). Researchers and practitioners, therefore, have increasingly focused on community demographics, structures, and cultural realities to examine opportunities for rural older adults to reside independently at home—to age in place—through ingrained systems of exchange and support (AARP, 2005; Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, 2006; Shenk, 1998).

#### *The work of stories*

As inherent storytellers (Fisher, 1987), individuals draw on the cultural, psychological, and material resources available within specific social contexts to make sense of and communicate personal and public worldviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Harter, Japp, & Beck, 2005). To that end, Randall (2008) argues aging and spirituality are narrative processes in which individuals make meaning of their individual realities through both the telling of and in the context of a complex set of storylines comprising the ideological setting of their worlds in general. Scholars have increasingly considered how intersecting social systems and cultural stocks of meaning foster and constrain personal and public experiences into late life (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). Religious beliefs similarly influence faith-based practices and moral expectations. On one hand, church policies and formal teachings “place boundaries on the beliefs and behaviors of the people who worship there” (Krause, 2009, p. 9). On the other hand, many of these doctrines, such as forgiveness and altruism, promote better social relationships and comprise a “central fount of American community life and health” in which faith-based organizations directly provide social support and services and indirectly encourage civic engagement and nurture moral values (Putnam, 2000, p. 79). Taken together, situated meanings of late life and institutional stories of the church serve as “public mindsets” (Harter et al., 2005, p. 21) or master narratives that embody a community’s values, beliefs, hopes, and fears and shape the lived experiences of older adults.

While much scholarship has focused on the motives, resources, and inner workings of the storyteller, Frank’s (2010) socio-narratology aims to understand instead what the story does for storylisteners. This approach positions stories as actors rather than passive accounts and encompasses the reciprocal work of stories and people in creating the social world. Specifically, Frank claims stories work to animate human life. They “work with people, for people, and always

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