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Book review

Countryside Connections: Older People, Community, and Place in Rural Britain, by Catherine Hagan Hennessy, Robin Means and Vanessa Burholt (Eds.) Bristol, Policy Press £75.00 (Hardback) ISBN: 978-1447310303

Countryside Connections is comprised of nine chapters by 25 different authors that self-describe themselves as representing health policy, philosophy, psychology, transportation, sustainable community development, social responsibility, gerontology, mobility, human geography, public health, sociology, nursing, health informatics, art, and planning. As such, the volume seems to be transdisciplinary, yet the authors explicitly say it is interdisciplinary. After a full read, I believe readers will agree that the volume moves from interdisciplinary with tones of transdisciplinary, to recognizing that transdisciplinary approaches are necessary to both the study and policy making surrounding the well-being and connectedness of rural elders. Simply put by the Editors, the book is about “Older peoples’ participation in rural community life” (p. xv). That seems rather simplistic as readers engage in what is a complex volume. The overall project on which the book is based is the Grey and Pleasant Land. Each chapter uses a different research method and studies one component of rural elder connectivity, with bookends of introduction and discussion of how to move towards a complex model to explain relationships between and among place, people, technology, transportation, and rural elders.

Chapter one presents statistics and introduces the larger project. It suggests three theories to use to study rural elder connectivity: Putnam’s social capital theory, Bourdieu’s four capitals, and Bronfenbrenner’s Human Ecological theory. Despite a long reference list, it is clear that there is a dearth of research about rural elders and their connections. Connection is a broad concept, and added to the social and other capitals plus the ecological approach, the Grey and Pleasant Landscape quickly becomes almost overwhelming. Research requires looking within and across individuals, organizations, policy, landscapes and technology. We know by the end of the chapter that the reader is in for a lot—but whatever that is, it is theory driven and evidence based, and takes a positive approach to aging instead of a “minimizing loss” approach. At this point it behooves the reader to take another look at the Table of Contents in order to be able to understand the components of the book.

Chapter two uses a governance perspective. The data used are from surveys. I found it fascinating that there seems to be an oxymoron in the notion that a sense of community and social cohesion drives independence, resiliency and a lack of reliance on the State. This is not examined further by the authors and leaves the reader wanting more. What we get is evidence that civic participation goes beyond elders being represented on town boards, which has interesting implications. As people age they have more time to give back, yet they may be overrepresented and not represent the profile of the community. This can cause disrespect instead of respect for the connectivity of elders. The authors

describe the many ways elders are connected in terms of governance: volunteering, charity work, voting, spiritual connectivity, participating in community groups and campaigns, and providing for the safety of the community.

Chapter three examines leisure. The data are drawn from surveys and oral histories. Quantitative data reveals that elders in rural Britain are not connected to *people* (first) in their leisure activities, but rather to pets, media (television, books, radio, computers), nature (gardens, walks) before being connected physically to people. And, it is not only aging that prohibits the enjoyment of many leisure activities by decreasing mobility, it is also the loss of place as people knew it—including the changing landscape of their community, loss of anchor institutions and the like.

Chapter four studies connection through a sense of belonging and utilizes a quantitative survey. Belonging is not only physical. It is also social, psychological (virtual) and temporal. Path analysis models identify important predictors of different types of belonging.

Chapter five focuses on mobility beyond transportation. It includes technology, and new services (e.g., delivery). Data were collected and analyzed both quantitatively (the Grey and Pleasant Land survey) and qualitatively (semi-structured interviews). The researchers suggest the notion of accessibility, which brings technology (computers, skype, etc.) and home delivered goods and services into the picture. The sample studied was quite mobile, with 90% walking at least 15 min per day and 79% driving a motorized vehicle. Over half used public transportation, and a third a taxi. And, 90% or more did not feel excluded. The authors conclude that the traditional approach to connectivity is irrelevant as we enter the new dynamics of aging.

Chapter six describes research carried out by an arts and humanities team. Interesting is that the team reveals their doubts that “social” researchers will accept their method of “deep mapping”. The chapter is as much about the method and how transdisciplinary approaches can provide meaning as it is about sharing results of the research. Sharing experiences with the researchers and connectivity were blurred as methods and results merged: conversation, walking, shared activities, remembering, connecting with the natural world. As a trained quantitative researcher, this chapter left me fascinated and confused—what was the method? What was the result? We have a lot to learn as researchers.

Chapter seven examines economics, specifically resource constrained rural elders. As an economist, this chapter felt most comfortable, with little new information. For other scholars, the information is presented in an approachable way. Income limited rural elders are limited in many ways and face constrained choice: heat a house or eat. Pay the bills or have a meal with friends. A lack of income goes beyond the economic realm and quickly has implications for social, psychological, and physical well-being.

Chapter eight is about encouraging and using stakeholder participation in studies such as the Grey and Pleasant Land Project. The chapter

can best be described as community participatory research. It describes how to and what not to do. And, it specifically identifies limitations as applied to the specific project focus of the book.

Chapter nine circles back to chapter one and attempts to expand the human-ecological model to include a temporal component. It summarizes the components of connectivity explored in each of the chapters. As can be expected, putting the ecological approach, and including social and other capitals, and time is not easily done. It is commendable the researchers took on this complex project.

Overall, this book is the culmination of a variety of subprojects of the Grey and Pleasant Land Project. It is a monumental volume that doesn't include a monumental number of pages as it covers theory and provides empirical evidence to advance the "new dynamics of aging". These dynamics include a host of concepts associated with connectivity

that can reach beyond the study of rural places and elders. Readers might not be able to put the pieces together themselves. I did not come away by myself with the themes that were provided by the authors: civic participation, social participation, landscapes, group identity, intergenerational relations, imaginative and virtual connectivity. Yet, these certainly were themes that arose in the chapters. I enjoyed this book! It reaches beyond interdisciplinary and begins to touch on transdisciplinary—the problems and promises of elder rural populations cannot be realized by one method or policy approach to well-being.

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