The Impact of Changing Demography and Socioeconomic Environments, and Ageing in a Small, Rural Town in Australia

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Abstract

In rural Australia, the recent global economic downturn was heralded by a highly competitive, global market neo-liberalisation, coupled with the effects of climate change, and a downward spiral of rural depopulation. These structural changes enabled the erosion of once vibrant and independent agricultural regions, and the amalgamation and/or collapse of many of the long-term political, economic, and social institutions in small towns. This paper explores the intersection of these population and socioeconomic changes, and ageing, in a small town in rural Australia. It is based on an analysis of empirical data captured during an ethnographic study conducted in 2012, supplemented with secondary documentary information, and the 2001, 2006, and 2011 census. While reflecting the overall ageing sociodemographic profile of rural Australia, the town also attracted an influx of *tree-changers*–here, single women aged between 55 and 65 years. The women chose this town because of the availability of cheap housing, and its potential for offering them a viable new lifestyle. However, because these late middle-aged women did not conform to the town's ideal new resident profile (young families), they were vulnerable to a prevailing suspicion and distrust of newcomers, and excluded from contributing to and/or participating in social, economic, and civic life. In effect, the town's response to economic threats, political challenges, and demographic change was to maintain the status quo, thereby incubating a resilience profile of inertia and stasis.

Keywords Demographic and socioeconomic change · Older women · Exclusion · Community resilience

This paper explores the tensions embedded in changing socio-economic environments and demography, and ageing, in rural Australia. It is based on a subset of the empirical data captured in a small town (population approximately 2,500 people) during the

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author's doctoral research. An ethnographic study was conducted in 2012, and the primary observational and interview data was augmented with secondary documentary information, and the 2001, 2006, and 2011 census. The independent and intersecting impact of age, demographics, and socioeconomic (structural) change in the town was then unpacked through a multi-level, multi-method analysis. A subsequent case study illustrates the interactions between a group of new residents (late middle-aged, single women) and the community. It reveals the endurance of historical-cultural norms and values that dominate the town's responsiveness to ageing, and demographic and socioeconomic change.

Setting the Scene

Change at an environmental level is often associated with differential concepts: adaptation, transformation, resilience, and sustainability, among others. While these parallel conceptions provide both unique and complementary perspectives on change, this paper focuses on social-ecological resilience.

According to Adger et al. (2011, p. 758) and Schmidt and Garland (2012, p. 438), resilience in social ecological systems encompasses three capacities in response to changing environments: to absorb perturbations and retain a similar function; to self-organise; and to adapt and transform through learning. Walker et al. (2004) attempt to defuse the "tension...between maintaining...a desired current configuration in the face of known (and some unknown) shocks, and simultaneously building capacity for transformability, should it be needed" (p. 6) by proposing that this dialectic rests on the intersection of four factors: latitude, the maximum amount of change that can be tolerated before recovery is not achievable; resistance, the difficulty (or ease) of implementing change; precariousness, the difference between the current state and the threshold of change; and panarchy, the overarching influence of externalities across time and space, for example, political restructuring, market dynamics, and/or global climate change (pp. 2–3).

Building on earlier work by Dovers and Handmer (1992), and Handmer and Dovers (1996), Schmidt and Garland (2012) developed a typology of community-based resilience responses: Reactive communities "aim to strengthen the status quo and resist change...and are likely to deny problems until too late [while] a proactively resilient community...accepts change and adapts to new conditions" (p. 438). A third type, the openly adaptable resilience response or dynamic resiliency (Sánchez-Zamora et al. 2014, p. 14) occurs when a community demonstrates flexibility, and a willingness to adopt new principles and institutional structures in anticipation of potential threats (Handmer and Dovers 1996, pp. 501–504).

At present, a consensual definition of community resilience remains elusive (Kulig et al. 2013). A survey of this currently sparse literature shows that community resilience is beset with the theoretical fuzziness and practical blurring (Kulig et al. 2013, p. 772) that is common to nascent concepts (Stirling 2010, p. 1030). This lack of clarity is evidenced by: overlap or substitution of community resilience with similar approaches such as community development (Zautra et al. 2008); context dependent and diffuse determinants of community resilience (Chaskin 2007), with few robust measures (Kulig et al. 2013, p. 765); scalar imprecision, where community is replaced by regional (Bristow and Healy 2014) or local resilience (Shaw and Maythorne 2013) as

equivalent entities and/or levels of analysis; and openly contested as in Davidson's (2013) critique of Berkes and Ross' (2013) emergent model of community resilience.

Nevertheless, the literature broadly supports Wilson's (2010) notion of multifunctionality, and Forgette and Van Boening's (2010) proposition that community resilience is a collective assessment of various attributes (political, economic, environmental, cultural, social, and personal) that are dynamically incorporated into a vertical structure, as modelled by Chandra et al. (2013). Community resilience is also associated with temporal processes and situational relations (Pendall et al. 2010, pp. 79–80, 83); the existence, development, and engagement of networked resources that shape a community's response to change, uncertainty, and unpredictability in the natural or social environment (Magis 2010, p. 402; Sherrieb et al. 2010, p. 228).

The conceptual coherence of community resilience is also severely impeded by the ambiguous meanings of community (Mulligan 2015), and amplified in a rural setting (Skerratt 2013), as follows:

Rural locations in Australia are typically revered as idylls; tranquil havens of the simple or good life, founded on traditional family values, and a strong sense of community (Allen 2002; Benson and O'Reilly 2009, p. 612). This normative identity is reinforced through an idealised rural landscape of "vast blue skies, red earth, white beaches" (Alexandra and Riddington 2007, p. 326), and empirically supported with higher life satisfaction rankings compared with urban conurbations (Ambrey and Fleming 2012, pp. 13, 20). It is also credited for recent phenomenon of sea (C) and tree lifestyle change migration from metropolitan cities to coastal and country (rural) areas (Costello 2006; Stockdale et al. 2013).

This imagery romanticises the reality of country living. Poverty is often hidden in rural regions (Commins 2004). The sample state recorded the second highest poverty rate in Australia in 2006 (Miranti et al. 2011, pp. 153–154), and nine of the ten most disadvantaged Statistical Local Areas (SLA) were situated outside its city metropolitan region (Mission Australia 2006, p. 42). These rural areas also comprised the greatest proportion of lone, elderly, and lone elderly people in poverty (Miranti et al. 2011, pp. 155–165), specifically, older women (Tanton et al. 2008, pp. 14–15). In addition, rural and remote locations, particularly the drought affected, broad acre farming districts, are populated by more people with low incomes, and/or in receipt of government pensions and benefits (Mission Australia 2006, pp. 19–21, 42). Moreover, because of the unfavourable environmental conditions, reduced productivity, decreased income, less spending, and lower employment cycle (Mission Australia 2006, p. 39), rural communities are caught in a downward spiral of economic and social disadvantage (Sherval and Askew 2012). (See Aslin and Russell (2008), and Rickards (2012) for a detailed analysis of these impacts.)

Consequently, farming was also viewed as a less viable career path for many sons standing to inherit the family farm, with the possible exception of large farm dynasties (Smith and Pritchard 2012, p. 44). This perspective magnified the earlier trend of young people moving to the city for work, and some older people selling up, relocating into the town to retire, or leaving their communities to gain better access to services such as specialised medical care (Beer et al. 2011, p. 6).

These farming areas are experiencing a classic catch-22 situation: On one hand, population decline and increasing deprivation due to multiple challenges, such as geographical isolation, low population density, an ageing demographic, poor socioeconomic status, restricted services, and limited or non-existent transport options (Cubit

and Meyer 2011, p. 588; McGuirk and Argent 2011), impinge on rural economies, communities, and families (Mission Australia 2006, p. 42): "To survive in dryland...farming, you *survived on little – even on hope* [italics in original]" (Anderson 2008, p. 76). Yet, on the other hand, ex-urban migration negatively impacts local housing markets (Beer et al. 2011, p. 6), reduces rental stock, and often creates schisms between long-term residents and newcomers (Costello 2006; Rickards 2012, pp. 130–131).

The interrelationships between a group of new residents (late middle-aged, single women) and a small rural community are analysed in the subsequent case study.

Approach

This study was derived (in part) from the author's doctoral research with the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom (UK). Ethical approval was received from the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC), and the research design conformed to the British Sociological Association (2002) Statement of Ethical Practice.

The methodology, ethnography, was chosen to accommodate a flexible research design, allowing the possibility to compare and contrast dual temporal (insider and outsider) and situational (site and sample) perspectives (Fine and Fields 2008; Gellert and Shefner 2009; Kawulich 2005). Ethnography is characterised by participant observation, where immersion in an environment over an extended period of time enables the researcher to explore how people experience their sociocultural contexts, processes, and meanings (Whitehead 2005, p. 5). For Alder and Alder (2012) credible research is generated by the degree of researcher and respondent closeness, and the researchers involvement in the field. This level of community engagement extends from peripheral (passive participation), active (qualified participation), to full (complete participation) membership roles (Alder and Alder 2012, pp. 17–19; DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, pp. 19–22). In this study, the researcher was wholly engaged with the local culture and adopted a full membership role in the town.

Although participant observation is the backbone of ethnographic research, other data may also be utilised to provide confirmatory evidence. Here: census (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2001, 2006, 2011; .id 2001, 2006, 2011) and policy documents contributed to comparative demographic, political, and socio-economic profiles, key informant interviews provided community, social, and rural contextualisations; and personal biographies in the form of journals or interviews added individual level information. These data sources were supplemented with extensive field-notes based on in-depth participant observation by the researcher between November 2011 and December 2012.

This in-depth residency took place in a location selected for three main reasons: it was the focus of a previous extensive sociological investigation (Dempsey 1990, 1992), enabling a long range perspective in concert with the recent revival of community restudies (Phillipson 2012); secondly, as the community is similar to the researcher's childhood town, it offered the author a degree of insider familiarity (Henley 2010); and thirdly, a growing demographic of small rural Australian towns is ageing women living on their own (ABS 2011; de Vaus and Richardson 2009).

Analogously, the inclusion criteria for the sample were women, aged 55 years and over, widowed, divorced, separated, and/or never married, and living on their own, in a

small town and/or neighbouring region, in rural Australia. And although the researcher planned to sample broadly across the older age spectrum, potential participants who were single and living in the town and/or the nearby area coalesced into two natural demographic pools: a late middle-aged group of women aged between 55 and 65 years, and an older old cohort who were 80 years of age and above. This demographic divide created two novel and distinct cohorts: older lifelong residents, and a younger group of newcomers. Notably, the lack of eligible participants between 65 to 80 years was unexpected, and occurred primarily because the majority of women in this age bracket were still residing with partners. In addition, the relatively recent influx of late middle-aged, single women into the town was not known in advance by the researcher, and only detected during her fieldwork. These newcomers, representing a changing age and socioeconomic demographic in the community, are the focus of this case study.

Access to and engagement with the community was facilitated by the researcher's personal and family profile. In terms of ruality, it complemented the older-old women's local (insider) background, while contemporaneously reflecting the late middle-aged women's age range and new resident (outsider) status. Consequently, most of the participants were identified first-hand by the researcher during casual, day-to-day encounters in the town. These interactions were mediated through spontaneous, informal conversations in the street and public gathering places, including the post office and supermarket; memberships of social organisations, such as church and charitable groups; and less frequently, formal volunteer roles at health care agencies and an information centre. Additional contacts from gatekeepers also supplemented the researcher's participant pool (Clark 2011).

To supplement the researcher's on-site observations, 14 late middle-aged women agreed to discuss their life course and experiences of relocating to the town. A semi-structured format was chosen; whereby sample questions, initially piloted in the UK, were revised and amended on location to more accurately represent the rural/local context.

Written and verbal information about the ethics approval process and authorisation, archiving and storing of research data, and future dissemination and publication of the research outcomes (Cucu-Oancea 2013, p. 236) was also distributed to each participant in advance/prior to any data collection. This was complemented with an individual, detailed, verbal explanation prior to each interview and journal handover. Consent to participate and permission to audiotape interviews was then obtained verbally and in writing from each participant (Ahern 2012). At that time, and as appropriate during the research process (Allmark et al. 2009), the women's confidentiality and anonymity, including their real names, the town's location, and their option to withdraw from the study at any point, was re/assured. Pseudonyms were randomly assigned to each participant by the researcher in keeping with their life histories, the setting, and the era.

All of the women were given a choice of interview (spoken) or journal (written) formats to extend the scope and richness of the data (Ogden and Cornwell 2010), and to accommodate individual differences and preferences (Hoffman 2009, paras. 4, 5.2, 6). Eight women elected to complete journals, with the remaining six interviewed by the researcher.

On completion of each journal and interview, the narratives were manually transcribed and coded to capture significant material and detect patterns and relationships. The primary and secondary data sets were then matched with different analytical methods: a community revisit (Charles and Crow 2012; Crow 2013; Crow et al. 2009) to assess the historical and cultural trajectory, and current status of the town;

the Framework method to enable comparisons within and between participant accounts (Swallow et al. 2011); and intersectionality (Andersen and Hill Collins 2013, pp. 4–6; Collins 1990, 2000; Hancock 2007, p. 64) to interrogate the interactions of the community and women. A corpus linguistic analysis (McEnery and Hardie 2012) was also conducted to ensure that the communication medium did not skew the findings. This analysis concurred with Berger and Iyengar's (2013) contention that written text is more refined and linguistically vibrant than spoken discourse. However, these differences were consistent and proportional across the cohort.

These multiple, differential analyses enabled the demographic and socioeconomic profiles for the case study.

Profiles

The Town Situated in a picturesque agricultural area, the town has functioned as the political, business, and service hub for the surrounding region for more than a century. But from the 1950's, the town's population has decreased, with approximately 2,500 people currently living in the nearly 100 square kilometre land area (ABS 2011). This slow decline signals the major structural changes that continue to impact the town and adjacent rural locality:

The recent economic downturn (Gross 2012, p. 132) was heralded by the amalgamation and/or collapse of many of the long-term political and economic institutions in the town–local branches of banks closed, businesses failed, and there was reduction in the provision of public goods and services. For example, one of the largest national banks now operates a sub-agency in a shop, rather than a full service branch. A key government department was also permanently closed during the researchers residency. Moreover, one of the biggest structural adjustments occurred when the town was defeated in its bid to remain the political and administrative centre of the region during a state mandated harmonisation of local governments. This loss was universally regarded as relegation to a secondary or inferior status, and continues to be a major source of contention and resentment for the town's residents.

Following the relocation and/or downsizing of regional offices, many of the previous professional and managerial opportunities no longer exist; a change that directly influenced the type of in-migration to the town, and altered the sociodemographic profile of the town. According to the 2011 census, there is a slightly higher number of women versus men overall, and an increasing age differential between the young and older residents. Women of post-retirement age (60 years and over) now make up the greatest proportion of the town's residents, consistent with the demographic profile of ageing in small rural communities. Lone person households have also risen; 34 per cent compared to 27 per cent of rural state region in 2011. These increases are particularly notable in the middle-aged (ages 45–64 year) and older (aged 65 years and over) age ranges.

A broad sense of socioeconomic categories can be generated by cross-referencing labour force, occupational, education, and income information. Accordingly, a synthesis of these indicators shows that the town's labour force participation rate (relatively stable at 50 per cent in 2011 and 2006) was lower than the comparative rural state region of 58 per cent in both 2011 and 2006. More people were employed in sales, technical work and trades, and as labourers in 2011 compared with 2006. However, many of the employment

opportunities associated with part-time and casual work in clerical, administration, and community and personal services that were traditionally filled by women, had decreased compared to the rural state region in 2011. This reduction was compounded by the closure of a factory, a grocery, several family run businesses, and the general stores that were once ubiquitous in larger rural towns. Work in manufacturing industries also declined between 2006 and 2011, but continued to provide jobs for 20 per cent of the men, primarily in animal feed processing plants, pig and poultry farms, and metal fabricating factories. Since then, the animal production and processing units have ceased to function, and the equipment manufacturer has downsized its local operations.

Nonetheless, more townspeople, especially women, had acquired higher (university) qualifications across the decade (2001 to 2011). However, this percentage was approximately half of the rural state region's 13 per cent in 2011. A larger proportion of the town's residents reported no qualifications (59 per cent) versus 48 per cent of the state's rural region. Weekly incomes were also generally lower in 2011, with 35 per cent of the town earning a low income (classified as less than $600.00A per week) compared to 25 per cent for the rural state region.

Significant demographic shifts occurred in the town as well. While reflecting the ethnically homogeneous *white* composition of rural Australia, the town also attracted "tree-changers" (Ragusa 2010). Similar to a coterminous development, "Sea"/"C" change, the tree change phenomenon represents an urban to rural migration, essentially "people who move from capital cities to country towns…in search of a better lifestyle." (Ragusa 2010, p. 137) Here, these tree-changers were a group of late middle-aged, single women, aged between 55 and 65 years.

The Late Middle-Aged Women Of the 14 late middle-aged women who agreed to participate in the study, the majority (11 women) was aged between 60 and 65 years; two women fell into the 55 to 60 year category and another was 70 years old. With one exception, all of the women moved to the town at various stages in their lives; most of them (10) relocated within the last five years. (Refer to Table 1 for the sociodemographic information for each of the women.)

All of the women were divorced (five had divorced more than once), apart from a widow, and one woman who had never married. The group of divorcees split evenly into a group of six women who had been on their own for less than 15 years, with the remaining six divorced for 15 years or longer.

In terms of their socioeconomic status, the women's employment history was generally erratic, and again, only Rae demonstrated a steady employment record. Nevertheless, most (11) of the women were homeowners. At the time of the study, 10 women received state unemployment support (benefits), two women were independently wealthy, and two were still working. Few of the women were educated to tertiary level; of these, a kindergarten teacher, two nurses, and a paralegal were represented. Two of these four women also had fine arts degrees.

Childhood for this group of women was marked by personal and social rejection. This disadvantage was curtailed by active rebellion in the mid-late teens and early adulthood, which led to a series of failed relationships all but two of the women. As single parents, the women's adult years were characterised by recurrent crises and prolonged adversity, in particular, severe financial hardship. But in their late middle age, the women suddenly and proactively decided to start a new life in the small rural town.

Table 1 Sociodemographic profiles of the late middle-aged women

Name	Age	Marital status	Occupational status	Economic status	Health status	Residential Status
Alice	60	Divorcee (twice), most recently for 1 year	Volunteer[a]	Benefits	Mental health needs	Born inter-state; Resident 1 year; Living in own caravan in caravan park
Barb	62	Divorcee for 30 years	Employed; Business (shop-owner/self-employed)	Benefits	Mental health needs	Born in region; Resident 5 years; Living in own shop premises in town
Berta	61	Divorcee (once), now separated for 3 years	Volunteer	Benefits	Mental health needs	Born in Germany; Resident 4 years; Living in own home in town
Gert	61	Divorcee for 35 years	Retired; Professional (para-legal)	Independently wealthy	No health needs	Born in Germany; Resident 2 years; Living in own home in town
Jane	60	Divorcee (four times), most recently for 2 years	Unemployed	Benefits	Mental health needs	Born in region; Resident less than 1 year; Living in rented home on farm
Jenny[b]	70	Divorcee for 22 years	Retired	Independently wealthy	Mental health needs (post divorce)	Born in the city; Resident 10 years; Living in own home on hobby farm
Judy[c]		Divorcee				
Linda	60	Divorcee (twice), most recently for 15 years	Employed; Professional (teacher)	Employed	Mental health needs	Born in city; Resident 5 years; Living in own home in town
Marg	60	Divorcee for 9 years	Retired	Benefits	Mental health needs	Born in city; Resident/ returnee for 30 years; Living in own home in town
Nola	63	Never married	Retired; Professional (missionary)	Benefits	No health needs	Born in region; Resident 3 years; Living in own home in town
Penny	55	Divorcee for 10 years	Volunteer	Benefits	Mental health needs	Born in city; Resident /returnee for 11 years, most recently less than 1 year; Living in rental flat in town

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Age	Marital status	Occupational status	Economic status	Health status	Residential Status
Rae	63	Widow for 11 years	Employed; Service (shop manager)	Employed	No health needs	Born locally; Resident of town long term; Living in own home in town
Ruth	61	Divorcee (twice), most recently for 12 years	Volunteer	Benefits	No health needs	Born in city; Resident 4 years; Living in own home in town
Trudy	59	Divorcee for 14 years	Volunteer	Benefits	Physical health needs (mobility)	Born in region; Resident 5 years; Living in own home in town
Wyn	60	Divorcee for 17 years	Volunteer	Disability pension	Physical and mental health needs; Multiple chronic conditions	Born locally; Resident 15 years; Living in rented adapted flat (apartment) in town

[a] 30 hours of volunteering per fortnight (two week period) is mandated under the terms of the Newstart 55+ allowance

[b] Although Jenny is aged 70 years, her sociodemographic profile is a closer fit to this late middle-aged group rather than the older old cohort

[c] Judy compiled a diary describing her day-to-day activities over a period of 41 contiguous days to provide a valuable insight into the everyday reality of a newcomer in the town. Her account was used to reference and cross-check temporal and situational events

Although all the women gravitated to the same location, their rationale for choosing this particular town varied widely and ranged from aesthetic to practical, as in the opportunity to purchase an empty shop with attached residence to enable financially self-sufficiency. However, their primary reason was the availability of affordable housing. Many of these houses were neglected and derelict (Ruth), but the chance to be homeowners, for Nola "a miracle in itself", more than compensated for this "minor inconvenience". In fact, most of the women welcomed the opportunity to renovate and remodel their houses and gardens to their personal specifications (Gert; Linda; Nola; Ruth). Home ownership is both an accessible and desirable goal in this community, but with significant personal and financial resources invested in their homes, this achievement meant that they were economic captives (Barb; Linda). (At the time of the study, only three of the women rented accommodation.)

The women were also openly committed to actively participating and engaging in all aspects of the community. This aim was augmented by the work-related requirements of the Newstart (55+) Allowance (Australian Department of Human Services, 2015). Under this scheme, mature Australian residents, age 55 years and over, are obligated to perform approved and suitable voluntary and/or paid work (including self-employment) for at least 30 hours per fortnight (two week period) to meet job seeker activity requirements. Even though this policy purported to be age friendly, in practice, it did not transpose across to small rural contexts where both work and quality volunteer opportunities were scarce. To qualify for this benefit, some of the women were compelled to volunteer in situations that did not suit their personality (Ruth), or expertise (Berta).

Tensions between the Women and the Town

In the current study, Ruth's volunteering experience is indicative of some of the pitfalls encountered by the late middle-aged women in their quest to contribute to the town. With a background in public administration, Ruth was resolute in her goal to volunteer with a prestigious institution. Her access was eventually permitted, but the long-term, local members then effectively blocked her participation by controlling rotas, and refusing to open any volunteer slots. After 18 months, she was still limited to contributing on a casual, emergency and relief basis, and/or scheduled to cover undesirable holiday times such as Christmas and New Year, when none of the regular volunteers chose to be available. Ruth then attempted to improve some long-standing operational procedures within the organisation. In comparison with her previous work environments, she felt that the institution's systems were antiquated, and technologically underdeveloped. She also denigrated the business sector (controlled by men) as:

> Older people stopping progress. Almost as though they want to stay in the 20th century but if they could, they would have the town function as it was in the 19th century. By older I mean 'oldest' generation, but the business people, the ones who are in their 40's to 60's can be just as anti-progress with technology.

But in sharing her professional acumen, and proactively exercising her personal agency where: "New generations are taking a stand. They know they have a right to express

their ideas and speak their opinions and they will", Ruth defied local tradition, and breached some implicit customs and values:

Firstly, by seeking a position reserved for long-term residents, Ruth "threatened the monopolistic rights of locals" (Dempsey 1990, p. 49). Newcomers were expected to be very grateful if offered the least desirable voluntary roles. More attractive opportunities, such as volunteering with the Meals on Wheels service and the before-school children's programme, were blocked by a combination of long-standing and stable community teams, and/or lengthy and complicated formal protocols. These included affiliation with a sponsoring organisation, and obtaining enhanced security clearances.

Secondly, Ruth did not "carry out her duties according to established practices...and assuming a subordinate position" (Dempsey 1990, p. 49). When Ruth demonstrated self-initiative to improve operational procedures, she violated the condition that new-comers perform subservient roles in an organisation. For this transgression, she was subjected to continual criticism, officially censured, and all of the other volunteers actively agitated to "get rid of her" . However, her reprimand stopped short of removal from the organisation, and/or being "eased out of town" (Dempsey 1990, p. 49).

Third, even though she was meeting a government benefit requirement to volunteer, Ruth viewed her contribution as "helping keep an important resource functioning in the town". The community differed: Not only was her activity perceived as aggressive, arrogant, and unwelcome, it was also regarded as work. Here, Ruth contravened the still prevalent, local understanding that women do not work for self- fulfilment and/or self-advancement; women's work is only condoned if it is to save a family farm or business (Dempsey 1992, p. 151).

Finally, by volunteering in a desirable institution, Ruth expropriated a valuable work experience opportunity that was tacitly allocated to the town's young people.

A commensurate situation was described by Dempsey in 1992:

The [newcomer] offended principally by trying to change things in the organisa-tions she joined. The proposed innovations implied criticisms of existing prac-tices, which is never well received in [the town], especially when offered by a 'newcomer'. Within days of her arrival...she was being 'bad-mouthed' in casual conversations. Those who had initial dealings with her were warning others 'to steer well clear of her.' Her subsequent attempts to join voluntary organisations eager for new members were rejected. She was chastised by leaders of the organisations she did manage to join for trying to take over, and her offers of assistance with various existing programmes within these organisations were refused. (p. 267)

For her impropriety, Ruth was sanctioned and isolated by the community, but in return, she refused to join in any social or leisure pursuits. Consequently, she amplified her outsider status as a "recent arrival who is single or widowed [and] uninterested in sport or the other activities that serve as a basis for voluntary organisational activity in [these communities]" (Dempsey 1990, p. 61).

Even so, most of the late middle-aged women involved in the study attempted to volunteer in the many charitable and service organisations in the town; a process that is generally regarded as a relatively standard entry point into a community, especially where employment opportunities are extremely limited. Volunteering for these women

proved to be a very complex process, and involved local sociocultural beliefs about the type and degree of community participation that is condoned for older women, as well as tacit knowledge of the town's hierarchy of service organisations. For example, although Senior Citizen's Centres are inexpensive, community oriented, and cater to adults over the age of 55 years, not one person admitted to the researcher that they attended any activities at the local Centre, because of its association with the stigma of ageing (Dempsey 1990, pp. 76–77): "They say 'go to the elderly cits [citizens] and join there', but we're not old enough, we don't fit into that elderly cits bit" (Berta). Conversely, Probus meetings and events were frequently cited as being socially attractive, albeit expensive and cliquey (Berta).

Traditionally, older women have been active in auxiliaries in the town (Dempsey 1992, pp. 75–76, 84). Their role was primarily supportive, and revolved around raising money and providing labour for male oriented clubs such as the Returned Services League (RSL): "We raise the money and the men spend it" (Dempsey 1992, p. 35). This ethos flows into the present, where treading the fine line between being regarded positively for *doing your bit*, but not too much (to avoid being perceived as trying to take control), is treacherous for non-locals.

Negotiating the organisational hierarchy is equally challenging. It is acceptable for newcomers to volunteer in companionship (visiting) roles in aged care facilities, and to help at charity shops, but involvement in any activity with more responsibility, for example, assisting in a resource centre, is subtly discouraged. Membership of preferred social clubs is also restricted. This discrimination is selective, and usually occurs at two levels: firstly, new places are limited, and joining requires an introduction by a local member; and secondly, ongoing participation demands a significant financial commitment to meet fees and other expected contributions (Wyn; Dempsey 1992, pp. 38–40).

Equally challenging, was the paucity of social opportunities for late middle-aged, single women: I've met some [other people] not very many. I don't think it's very easy to move into a small country town. It's difficult, it's not easy to make friends. People are superficial where, unless you are born here, [pause], they are nice to you and everything, but you haven't got [an] 'in'. (Berta)

As a consequence, the women's socialisation was largely utilitarian in nature, with social activities related to outings to the supermarket (Barb), or the local post office (Linda), and social contacts restricted to volunteering (Penny), or business acquaintances (Barb). Most of the women combated these limitations by following a regimented schedule "to get through the day" (Berta; Alice), and/or keeping busy in their houses and gardens (Gert; Linda; Ruth), but "nights are terrible, there's just nowhere to go on your own" (Berta). Moreover, invitations to join others for an evening meal or another function were either non-existent or very rare (Linda), further reducing the repertoire of *acceptable* recreation to the community film night, or watching television by themselves (Barb).

Furthermore, the majority of the town's recreational opportunities were segregated and skewed towards men (Dempsey 1992, p. 54), as evidenced by the exodus of locals travelling en mass to barrack (support) for the town's (male) footy (Australian rules football) teams at away matches. Many of the late middle-aged women were alienated by the "physicality" of the town's culture, where male drinking, sport, and [in 2012] gambling, go hand in hand (Dempsey 1992, pp. 47–48). For Berta:

A lot of people go and play the pokies[1] and spend their money...But see I don't...and I don't think there is anywhere in the town where a single person, a woman, a single woman, my age, would go. Like at night-time. During the day it's fine, but in the evenings, it's not safe to walk around anymore. It's, I wouldn't go to the club, I don't like the pokies.

A seemingly uncomplicated activity, "going out for a drink", typifies the social constraints and structural forces that interact to exclude the late middle-aged women: Even though many rural hotels offer meals and family-friendly spaces, drinking was regarded a male prerogative, and pubs were the domain of the town's men in the 1990's (Dempsey 1992, pp. 48–52): "Any woman who drinks to excess will be stigmatised as a drunk and...possibly as a sexually available woman" (Dempsey 1992, p. 50). This caveat remains valid in 2012: "If you are a single man you can go and have a beer with the guys in the pubs, but for a woman, there's no way I would go in and just order a glass of wine and sit there" (Berta).

In an environment where a woman's male contacts are limited to friends of her husband (Dempsey 1992, p. 60), and any lengthy engagement with a man implies that the woman is *after him* (Berta; Linda; Dempsey 1992, pp. 33, 60), it was extremely difficult for single, older women to meet and interact with unattached men in the town. The only viable option open to them was to socialise in a group. Single women though, were not usually included in mixed groups (married and singles, male and females) because women compete over men (Dempsey 1992, p. 176), and wives viewed unmarried women with suspicion (Berta). In same-sex groups, single women also were "perceived as threats to cherished friendships or valued positions" (Dempsey 1990, p. 307).

So there's really nowhere to go, there's not...For me, it's, I don't consider going out for a meal on my own, whether it's lunch or tea, so I come home and cook my own. It's cheaper and what do you do, you go there, and just eat your meal and then you leave if you haven't got company or anyone to talk to. (Berta)

Women who *escaped* at weekends (Alice; Berta) to attend *sophisticated* events (cinemas, theatres, concerts), and who did not fit the rural cultural stereotype (Dempsey 1992, p. 58) such as enjoying country music, were shunned.

To offset this imbalance, Gert, a proficient artist, established a small art gallery, and offered painting lessons to complement the existing art scene. As for Ruth, her proactive agency contravened two of the local prohibitions: city type leisure (Dempsey 1992, pp. 58–59), and the tall poppy syndrome (Dempsey 1990, p. 151; Manci and Penington 2011). Gert was also marginalised in the community for being different: she was a foreigner and spoke with a strong German accent; she produced the wrong sort of artwork (modern art instead of the usual landscape painting); and as an artist, she was assumed to be volatile, unreliable, and eccentric. In addition, Gert broke the rule relating to women and work. Her downfall though, was to offend local sensitivities by unilaterally presuming what the community needed in terms of culture, and by

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[1] A colloquial term for poker machines and the prevalence of gambling at Sports Clubs.

implication, intimating that the town suffered from a cultural deficit. Gert's fledgling business was eventually abandoned because of poor community support.

These local sociocultural proscriptions and structural norms were very effective in blocking the late middle-aged women's access to, and engagement with, most voluntary agencies, leisure activities, and from starting entrepreneurial ventures.

Intersections

Such constraints exemplify the community's unsullied belief in its preeminent economic and political role in the region: a perspective that is contradicted by data from the recent census. Not only does the town occupy a low rank on the SEIFA[2] disadvantage index (910, compared to the Australian national (1002) and equivalent rural regional state (978) benchmarks), it is also lower than the surrounding smaller towns (ABS 2011; .id 2011).

Long-term friendship cliques (Dempsey 1990, p. 60) reinforce the town's conviction of its superiority. These multiple, close, personal and public ties (Dempsey 1990, pp. 95–97), and tightly-knit, social networks (Dempsey 1990, p. 307) serve as indicators of social and community cohesion (Dempsey 1992, p. 27) and act as decisive arbiters of belonging and insider/outsider status for the community:

> Residents...define themselves through their shared history, their shared future and by their hostility to an external threat. [The town] exists as a social entity...and reaffirms its existence through engaging the boundary maintenance activity that distinguishes it from other social worlds, and from the institutions and the people which it perceives as different, and often opposed to it. (Dempsey 1990, p. 41)

As such, this community closure was an extremely effective gatekeeper in isolating nearly all of the late middle-aged women. Hence, the women's experience of interacting with the local townspeople was perfunctory at best. Linda's intimation that: "you're an outsider unless you've been married within the community four generations ago, or have been born here. [Otherwise] you'll always be an outsider" echoes Dempsey's 1990 assertion that "Any kind of friendliness extended may be superficial and the amount of care or concern involved...slight" (p. 59). On many occasions, the late middle-aged women were irrelevant to the locals and disregarded:

> But for an older person, it's harder to move into a small town...There's no, nothing where you feel, even the CWA [Country Women's Association], you [um] they're cliques, they've known each other all their lives. They know their family history, they know everything, so you'll always be an outsider. You always feel like you don't really belong. (Berta)

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[2] The SEIFA index is an indication of the relative level of socioeconomic disadvantage based on low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment, and jobs in relatively unskilled occupations. Consequently, a lower score indicates a higher level of disadvantage, with the average population weighted SEIFA score for Australia set at 1000.

At other times, they were completely rejected: "I've had a person actually say to me 'unless you're born and bred in [the town], I don't want to know you'" (Berta).

Gender and singleness intersect to further marginalise the late middle-age women. For instance, in Dempsey's study, single women were classified as deviants (Dempsey 1990, pp. 41–53): "These categories of people serve as foils for the community to delineate its moral as well as social boundaries" (Dempsey 1990, p. 307). Analogously, in 2012, the late middle-aged women's social motives were often judged with suspicion by locals, and because of their relative newness and limited "community intelligence" (Linda), some of these women violated the unwritten social code governing respectable women's behaviour: "Being female is a bit restricting...because you've got to watch what you do and say, and where you go" (Berta).

While Berta's isolation was representative of the other late middle-aged women's experience, it was also a powerful indicator that these women did not appear to know each other, and/or they did not socialise. Here, Dempsey (1992) provided a precedent for this dilemma (pp. 270–271), by identifying the impediments to women newcomers forming a social group in the town (pp. 250–251). Three of these barriers relate directly to the late middle-aged women's situation, namely: women's subordinate position in the community hierarchy; the demography of close and cross-cutting ties that *feed* the town's gossip chains (Berta); and sociocultural norms that stiffle any sign of rebellion. And as Ruth and Gert discovered, these processes of exclusion "can be implemented with the precision of a military operation" (Dempsey 1990, p. 314).

Despite their best intentions to participate and contribute to the community in a meaningful way (Linda), the women were socially excluded (Gert), leading to a retrograde withdrawal and retreat into their own, closed (home) environments (Ruth), and solitary hobbies: "writing, scrap-booking, reading, walking and pleasing myself" (Marg). As non-locals, the women were in but not of the community, so they tended to lead disconnected and parallel lives, "making do with what you've got here and taking the occasional trip away" (Alice).

It is evident that these women were unwanted and unwelcome in the community: "When newcomers are not integrated into the community, it may lead to exploitation and exclusion due to stigmatic labels" (Brown et al. 2014, p. 219). Although the intentions of tree-changers differ from amenity migrants and/or second (recreational) homeowners in rural areas (McKinlay and McVittie 2007), these women were still subject to suspicion and distrust:

> There is also a tendency to refer to retirement migrants as a generalised 'other'...this is problematic, as retirement migrants consistently referred to themselves as rural and/or 'local' despite not fitting the dominant ideology of what a local should represent, and these differing viewpoints may potentially cause community conflict and threaten social connectivity. (Winterton and Warburton 2012, p. 336)

In addition, these older, single women did not represent the type of newcomer preferred by the community; they were not young families with the (assumed) potential to make a long-term investment in the town's future.

And since many of the late middle-aged women were benefit recipients, the local residents associated them with the ferals; long-term welfare claimants who moved to the town primarily to circumvent government work requirements. Moreover, by adding

to the surfeit of elderly women in the town, the late middle-aged women were viewed as placing a further burden on the town's finite resources and services, without benefiting the community. At this point, it is pertinent to recall that the women's motivations for relocating to the town were based on relatively prosaic reasons: aesthetics, practicality, and affordability; plus a desire to make a positive change in their lives and to contribute to the community, rather than a strategic intent to take advantage of it. For Ruth, this translates as an impediment to progress:

> The oldest 'locals' can't see this because they're too busy protecting their heritage...It's the new generations like me who want to see this town prosper. The oldies don't know one way or the other – they just live here and accept what their 'local' [media] tells them. (Ruth)

Again, these differences in perception are notable signifiers of the enduring biases that separate locals and newcomers (Dempsey 1990, pp. 48, 61).

Responses to Change

The town has benefited from an historical and cultural position of political, social, and economic prestige and power until recently. It also attracted new in-migration, albeit of a non-preferred type, thereby conferring the town with a significant demographic advantage over the neighbouring rural communities. However, it has failed to capitalize on these sociodemographic and socioeconomic assets. This neglect is detailed below:

Sociodemographic Change A fortuitous convergence of biophysical and economic assets (Florida et al. 2011) fostered the town's appeal to in-migrants, namely, an attractive natural setting (Matarrita-Cascante et al. 2010, pp. 212–213), and a surfeit of cheap housing stock (Stockdale and McLeod 2013, p. 81). These advantages allowed the town to minimise some of the disadvantages often associated with rural and remote living (Vinson et al. 2007), in addition to circumventing the presumption of offering financial incentives to attract and retain residents in regional Australia (Nicholas and Shah 2014).

As observed previously, the town discounted the tree-change (late middle-aged women) residents in favour of traditional family in-migration. This strategy was predicated on a bond of reciprocity (Brown et al. 2014, p. 228), whereby a young couple with children were expected to develop closer ties to the town, put down roots, and contribute to local economy. Although this rationale is supported by Coulter (2013, p. 1958) who found that school-age children constitute a life course tie that lessens families' desire move from a location, it also points to a paradox in that divorce and separation are the primary triggers of in-migrant moves to a community in Australia, rather than young families (Clark 2013, pp. 328, 331–332).

Since the late middle-aged women were systematically excluded from fully participating and contributing to the community, an opportunity to capitalise on the ageing demographic (Menec et al. 2015, p. 15), and the growing trend of amenity in-migration to rural areas of Australia (Argent et al. 2007), is perhaps being missed.

Socioeconomic Change Because of the "politics of place" (Paniagua 2014, p. 51), namely, a providential geophysical setting that supported agricultural diversification (Simmie and Martin 2010, p. 31), and a propitious reserve capacity accrued from its previous privileged position in the region, the town also remained relatively immune to the recent demographic, political, and economic changes in rural Australia. While these advantages did not prevent the town from losing its seat of local government, and the consolidation and/or closure of civic departments and businesses, they translated into more of a political slight and reputational affront, rather than an economic disadvantage.

To date, the town has not been unduly challenged by these situations; its tipping point has not been exceeded, and its inherent elasticity to resist change remains patent. According to Simmie and Martin (2010, pp. 31–32), this response models a locked in developmental path. In terms of resilience, there are two types of lock-in: a positive attribute of resilience where a community is able to withstand an external change and maintain its developmental trajectory; and alternatively, a negative attribute when a path-dependent lock-in retards a region's adaptation to shock and undermines its resiliency. Based on these designations, the town presents as a reactive community that resists change, and fails to recognise and/or address challenges in a timely manner (Schmidt and Garland 2012, p. 438). Penny's critique: "I don't think it [the town] will change quickly. We've only just got an [ethnic] restaurant. There is already no available accommodation and prices have jumped but it will stay the same for the years ahead" is indicative of the stasis imbuing the town.

Conclusion

Moving to the town was a voluntary and agentic choice for the the late middle-aged cohort, all of the women acted deliberately and proactively to effect positive change in their lives. They viewed their move to the town as a new start, replete with the possibility to reinvent themselves.

However, instead of providing "an inclusive...culture that generates a positive and welcoming sense of place" (Wilding 2011, p. 30), the town marginalises and mistrusts the late middle-aged women (Davis et al. 2012), in line with the friction between amenity and in-migrants, and locals, in rural locations (McKinlay and McVittie 2007; Scott et al. 2011). This (mis)perception belies the complex social dynamics of rural communities and their relationship with newcomers (Pugh and Cheers 2010). It is also a telling indictment of the stubborn and residual persistence of local, cultural norms and values.

When confronted with economic threats, political challenges, and demographic change, the town resorted to a repertoire of conservative, true and tried solutions (young family in-migration) in an attempt to restore its former elite position. Its response to these crises is to maintain the status quo, rather than proactively seeking new solutions. A comprehensive comparison with Dempsey's previous work also indicated that little change has occurred in the community during the intervening years. In effect, the town is incubating a profile of inertia and stasis.

Two persistent beliefs underpin and reinforce this approach to sustainable development: firstly, the town's geographic, political, and economic legacy is inherent and

conveys relative immunity from the prevailing environmental and sociodemographic stressors; and secondly, its capacity to withstand and absorb these disturbances (Christopherson et al., 2010, p. 8; Foster 2007, pp. 8–9) is both intrinsic and infallible. Simmie and Martin (2010, pp. 31–32) attribute this response to a locked in developmental path or "withstanding force" (Christopherson et al. 2010, p. 8)–in essence, survival by stagnation.

Limitations

The primary limitations of the study relate to the research design, and the research findings:

Research Design

Sample The sample community was chosen to model a typical small, Australian country town. However, it is physically and demographically larger than the neighbouring towns, with a greater provision of goods and services, and more opportunities for social interaction. It is also characterised by a lower index of disadvantage. These sociodemographic and socioeconomic differences could directly influence the findings. The town was also selected to provide an adequate sample of older, single, rural women, and reflect the population ageing demographic of small rural towns. Different approaches were used to obtain a balanced sampling frame, but some sociodemographic profiles were potentially under, or not represented, for instance, women who were absent, ill, extremely busy, or socially isolated. These omissions would disproportionately alter the results.

Methodology The core of ethnography is participant observation in the field. Ethnographers engage a range of data formats to improve the reliability and validity of their observations. Accordingly, participant observation by the researcher was supplemented by first person accounts in this study to minimise the possibility of flawed perceptions. And while journals and face-to-face interviews were utilised to accommodate different narrative styles, participant self-report is subject to response bias.

Research Findings The conclusions reached in the study are highly dependent on the identified sample, setting, and context, and as such, are not directly generalisable or transferable to other situations. For example, since the case study is delimited to a specific age, period, and cohort (late middle-aged, single women living in rural Australia), it is uncertain how the findings relate to other groups based on age, gender, marital status, and/or locations, including urban sites, and rural areas in other countries. And as the town's demographic profile is ethnically white, it is equally unclear how the results translate to indigenous and minority populations, as well as in-migrants from other backgrounds. Similarly, although the town was carefully chosen to represent rural Australia, it may not be typical or analogous to other towns.

Issues for Further Research

Appreciating that this case study was exploratory and limited in terms of its application to other contexts and situations, it nonetheless raised some additional issues and questions:

Would the findings differ if the study were predicated on an alternative theoretical underpinning such as sustainability or transformation, rather than the concept of resilience? Is rural resilience a subset of community or regional resilience, or a(n) separate entity?

At present, the community's response to changing demographic and socioeconomic environments is faltering. To what extent is this *survival by stagnation* an artefact of the town's locational historical and cultural identity?

The study indicated that the late middle-aged, single women were 'boxed in' by the community norms and values. Is the predominance of these constraints unique to this setting and/or age/period/cohort?

Finally, notwithstanding these limitations and outstanding issues, this case study contributes to the literature by illuminating the overarching sociocultural norms that impact a small town's responsiveness to ageing and demographic and socioeconomic change in rural Australia.

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