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AGEING IN PLACE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN RURAL DWELLING OLDER ADULTS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This research set out to answer three related research questions. Firstly, if and how rural dwelling older adults experience social isolation; secondly, what aspects of community were seen as contributing to or buffering against social isolation; and thirdly, how these aspects affected older adults' ability to age in place in their rural communities. This research used a social constructionist informed thematic analysis to analyse the interviews from seven participants over the age of 65 who lived in rural areas of the Manawatu-Whanganui Region classed as 'rural with low urban influence' under Statistics New Zealand's Urban/Rural Profile (2004).

The findings from this research revealed that the participants did not experience social isolation from surrounding urban centres due to increased accessibility but did experience some social isolation within their rural communities due to social, demographic and economic changes in their localities. These changes had significant implications for possible social interactions and the participant's ability to age in place and was influenced by whether a participant felt included or excluded in their rural community. The participants formed two definitions of social isolation based on their experiences. One, based on travel time relative to distance; and the other based on expectations of social interaction frequency when living a 'rural lifestyle' in a 'rural community'. These findings contribute to the literature on social isolation, ageing in place, and age friendly rural communities within a New Zealand context, by drawing attention to the nuanced ways in which social isolation might be experienced, and by reflecting on the significance of the connections between people and places in the construction of 'communities'.

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Lastly I would like to thank the participants of this research for taking the time to talk to me and for so graciously allowing me into their homes and lives; without you this thesis would not have been possible.

Preface

This thesis endeavours to understand the extent to which social isolation is experienced by older rural dwellers. The stories and experiences of participants are very much connected to their identity, social relationships and local context in which they dwell. In order to acknowledge these wider aspects which inform the stories of my participants I created a 'pen picture' of each participant (found in chapter 5). These pen pictures provided a means of contextualising and connecting participant quotations, presenting them in terms of their connection to the person, rather than as disconnected thoughts and feelings. Creating these pen pictures encouraged me to reflect on the context of my research journey, and so before I present this thesis I would like to relate my own pen picture to provide readers with a broader understanding of how my wider experiences have informed my interpretations, in much the same way as the participants' have.

Before leaving home to go to University I was a member of a rural community in the Manawatu-Whanganui region, one not so far from where many of my participants lived. The Mangamahu Valley, where I grew up and where my parents and brother continue to farm, is 50 minutes' drive (approximately 60km) from the nearest urban centre, Whanganui, or one and a half hours from Ohakune. The village of Mangamahu consists of a hall, a church, and three street lights. There used to be a hotel and a post office, when travel to Mangamahu took all day by horse and carriage, however these buildings have long since been converted into homes. The closest shops to Mangamahu are now in Whanganui which is where we acquire all of our supplies and services, however the vet service, farm supply chains and postal service do still deliver to Mangamahu.

I attended Mangamahu School which, at the time, had more than 30 pupils in two classrooms. It now struggles to remain open with only 4 pupils in one classroom. I also attended the Christmas service in the local church every year, an event which still occurs but on a much smaller scale. I performed school plays, received awards, and attended disco dances in the local hall which is no longer used due to a lack of people to fill it. As I began work on this thesis topic

I realised many of the changes in my rural community were also mirrored in the participant's localities. While I had moved into a larger town to live and study, I was curious about the experiences of those older people who remained ageing in place.

When I was a child all of my living grandparents lived on our farm. My grandfather and grandmother, who farmed the land before my parents, lived next door to us on the farm when I was very young but moved to Whanganui when they retired. After that, my Nana, who was widowed, moved out from town into a house on our farm so that she could be closer to us. Eventually her unpredictable health and the unpredictable access to urban areas (particularly in winter) meant that she had to move back to town in order to be closer to health services. Now, as my parents approach older age, they have begun to discuss how they will grow old in their community, how they can make their home and their community easier for them to live in as they age, and how my brother and I can influence this. Many of their neighbours and fellow farmers have begun to move to rural areas closer to Whanganui so that they can continue their farming lifestyle but also be closer to urban services, this has caused the smaller farms in the area to be brought out and amalgamated into fewer, larger farms making our family owned farm one of the few to remain. This has also meant fewer people living in the valley and many empty houses. My family's story also provoked me to consider the challenges and possibilities faced by those who remained in place as they aged. My experiences of dwelling in a vibrant but changing rural place have meant I feel a special connection to this research and its participants; I can relate to their way of life and empathise with their situation.

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