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RURAL COMMUNITIES

Expressions of 'community' in context: narratives from
the Lower Mataura Valley in Southland

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the notion of 'community', this study utilises a qualitative research approach to analyse the changing nature of rural communities, as expressed by residents in the Lower Mataura Valley, in Southland, New Zealand. This study examines the changes in agriculture as a manifestation of recent economic and social restructuring in Western society, and explores the implications for a specific place-based community, by focusing on the ways in which local residents construct their ideas about this 'community'.

The literature review examines past theories and draws from broader social theories to account for the complexity of the term. Likewise, the wider contexts in which the Lower Mataura Valley is influenced by, and exists within, were considered through exploring the socio-economic and environmental conditions occurring at various spatial levels: from local to global.

Data collection utilized qualitative methods appropriate for a researcher with local knowledge: principally, in-depth interviews and informal conversations, as well as personal observations and secondary data while in the study area. Data analysis draws on a conceptual framework for reading 'community' by focusing on the meanings, practices, spaces and structures that were constructed, and the way that these constructions were interrelated processes which maintained, or challenged the situated meaning of 'community' in relation to the Lower Mataura Valley.

Findings show the importance of understanding the place-specific arrangements and interconnections to local, national and global forces of change in accounting for people's reactions to transition. These constructions highlighted that 'community' is as much a negotiated phenomenon in perpetual process, as it is a form of social life indicative of a particular 'community'. These findings would suggest that there is a need to keep an open mind to how specific place-based communities will be materially and culturally expressed in the future.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WDFF	Women's Division Federated Farmers
A& P	Agricultural and Pastoral
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
NZDB	New Zealand Dairy Board
NZDG	New Zealand Dairy Group
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
OECD	Organization of Economic Co-operation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal