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Social connectedness and rural ageing

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Phase 1 The Research Questions

- What events, issues and processes associated with the ageing process, challenge rural older people's capacity to maintain their preferred social networks and levels of engagement?
- What are the mechanisms and processes by which these challenges act on networks and social engagement, particularly in the rural context?
- Is it possible to identify particular critical junctures in this process that may provide opportunities for interventions designed to ameliorate disengagement pressures?
- Are older rural individuals, or we as researchers, able to identify services, supports or strategies that they/we believe can assist in maintaining social engagement in the face of age-related challenges?

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Phase 1 Methodology


Individual semi-structured interviews with 69 older rural people in three rural LGAs

Focus group discussions with 32 service providers in the same areas

Individual interviews with 11 key policy and service planning bureaucrats.

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Social Connectedness

Promotes a sense of comfort, wellbeing and anxiety-reduction. (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky & Brousema, 1993)

Is a determinant of resilience in rural places (Wainer & Chesters 2000)

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Social connectedness – positive effects on health, wellbeing, quality of life

Protective of mortality (Cerhan & Wallace 1997; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010)	May profoundly influence health beliefs, behaviours and outcomes (Register & Scharer, 2010)
Protective against dementia (Fratagioni et al. 2000)	Assists in coping with death of spouse/partner (van Baarsen 2002)
Lowers blood pressure (Strogatz, et al. 1997)	Source of emotional, tangible and informational support (Shaw et al. 2007)
Buffers stress (Cohen et al 2000; 2001),	Less likely to rate own health as fair or poor (Booth & Mathews 2009)
Helps maintain cognitive function in old age (Beland, et al. 2005)	Important for quality of life Sinclair et al 1990; Wiggins et al 2004)
Is a factor predicting entry to residential care (Kendig et al 2010)	Provides meaningful roles (self-esteem, purpose to life) (Cohen 2004)

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Aim of this analysis

To further our understanding of the ways in which informal social networks function for participants in the study and establish whether they seem to meet, or not meet their individual needs.

To identify the characteristics of effective networks.

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Participants' networks – diversity and complexity

- level of social participation, community involvement
- valuing of social engagement
- level of interest in social activities
- satisfaction with social participation, community involvements

Interested and involved

I thought, well I have to get out and do something. ... when I was doing the Country Club I didn't want to do anything because I was fully occupied. ... (Now) I am secretary/treasurer of Senior Citizens. ... I go on bus trips ... (with) the Intrepid Explorers. ... do catering. ... Last week, ... we catered for nearly 70 people.... But there are days that I just cook and serve up and wash up. But you are involved with people, and it's good. (OF5)

Well it (Senior Citizens Club) is just the elderly getting together. ... We take a lunch, a plate or something and we sort of share, and then we have a meeting and play bingo or cards or something, and afternoon tea, and toddle off home again having felt really good about chatting to somebody. (OF2)

R: So it's nice to have people pop in?
Oh, yes. We're always glad to see anyone. (SmF8)

Interested not involved

For years I've belonged to the CWA, that's another group that's folded, must be 10 years since that folded. We ran out of members, we'd just got old. We mainly did catering and nobody got married anymore so that fell through, and then bowls folded, and I belonged to the bowls club for 30 years. Mostly the things I still do I really enjoy doing. I just wish there was a few more around to do it with. (OF2)

I've not been interested in the bowls, and we're not card players so we haven't become involved in that, which in hindsight would have been a good thing. If we'd got into that a few years ago then we would have, sort of, known people. (StrF5)

We need a community hall and a library that's closer. ... We haven't got a social committee up around here. Not where everyone goes out and sits down and has a good talk to anyone. ... your dances years ago are gone. You can have crib nights or euchre nights or something to interact, but for the men... I know R (neighbour), he gets very bored. ... We have got nothing to do. (BF5)

You never go to anything ... any big functions ... you don't seem to have those anymore. (QM4)

Not interested and not involved

We are not socially minded. (*Re extent of contact with other retired people*) Virtually none. Our interests are so different. (SmF9 and SmM7)

I say, 'hello' to everyone around, but I don't stand talking or sitting on the park bench yaffling. But a lot of them do and really enjoy that. And there's a group that go to golf, and a lot of them go to the pub of a night. I don't bother, that's not my scene. (QM3)

I don't like imposing myself on other people, I have to be invited (laughs), so I just don't go visiting.

R: And does anyone come and visit you?
Occasionally, but not too often. Again, that's the way I like it (laughs). (QM1)

Size and makeup of networks

The size and the makeup of networks are not necessarily good indicators of what constitutes an effective resource and support network for meeting individual older people's needs.

Four characteristics of effective networks

1. A range and variety of connections
2. Functional overlap and redundancy
3. Reciprocity
4. Balance between availability when needed and permitting a sense of privacy and independence

Frequent and close connections

I see my son down the street. He comes in once a week ... and the daughter calls in and sometimes brings some goodies that she's cooked for me. And I'm very fortunate in one respect – my wife's sister lives in Smithton, and her two daughters. They come in once a fortnight, and even though the wife's been dead nearly 11 years, they never miss. ... Just wonderful people, just out of the goodness of their heart. (StM1)

I've had a hell of a good life, and life's still good. ... if you've been around and met people and got a lot of friends who care, you don't want anything else. (StrM2)

Episodic and occasional connections

But you talk. Everyone's friendly round the Op. Shop. You only work for a month then another lot takes over. You meet people ... and then at Christmas time you always have a little get-together and you meet up with everybody. You mightn't see them again until next time you take over, but you sometimes see them in town. (StrF2)

Functional overlap

(Re what activities are enjoyed) I like sharing time with other women, I like entertaining, yeah all those things, I like having fun too.

AND

The husbands (of core group of friends) will come and do anything for you. ... We sort of made a bit of a pact when we got together, that we'd watch out for each other. ... You all know where the keys are in case, you know, they don't show up somewhere, that sort of thing. (BF1)

Some redundancy

I see my son ... and the daughter calls in and sometimes brings some goodies she's cooked for me. And I'm very fortunate in one respect. My wife's sister ... and her two daughters, they come in once a fortnight ... and even though the wife's been dead nearly 11 years they never miss a fortnight. (StM1)

I've got good friends ... (Weight Watchers) is good fun, it's real social. There's about half a dozen of us go. ... And then every so often we have a barbecue, ... that's another social outing (with) different ones. There's two from Senior Cits and one from Weight Watchers and one from CWA and the others are different ladies. (StrF2)

Reciprocity

My daughter and my grandkids I see all the time. She's a single mother. ... I help her and she helps me. She often rings me of a morning and says, "I've got to start work at 8am can you come over?" If E... (residential care home where her husband is) rang me, like they did before when S.. had the seizure, I just rang her ... and when I've had that heart rhythm, ... several times she took time off work to take me. (SmF4)

I've got a couple of sawmillers, ... we go and get timber, he gives us a good deal and we give them fish and all this sort of stuff. (StrM1)

The right balance between availability and privacy, independence

At one stage my daughter wanted me to go and live up there and I said, "No way. You live your way and I live mine. I know you are there if I need you." So it works out that way. (StM1)

R: So B. (friend who visits and chats when her husband is in his workshop) keeps an eye does he?
Oh yes, he's been a friend all his life. (SmF8)

This is a little community (in 12 older people's units) ... not like the ones up the top where there is about 80. I couldn't live there. ... I'm outgoing but I like people out of my face, I don't like people invading my space.

R: And yet there are people around?
Yes, and we all get on. (SmF2)

Summary – network functioning

Overall effective networks gave participants choices and the flexibility to use their connections in ways that most closely met their needs at particular times and in particular respects.

Participants preferred to feel that they were connected to a network of people, and these networks served a variety of purposes

Participants preferred to feel that some in their networks may provide support *if necessary* rather than were there only to support them.

Conclusions

Findings argue against one-dimensional service models and interventions to address the service and support needs of older rural people.

The analysis has shown the advantages of taking into account the perspectives of older people – will allow design of services and supports to more closely fit their needs and address the functional breadth and complexity that characterise effective support.

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