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The Community Life of Older People in Ireland (Gallager, C., 2008): book review

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This book offers a holistic view of older people's lives, based on a study of two communities in Ireland. It brings together key themes of connectivity, friendship and altruism by highlighting a range of social networks that paint a picture of positive ageing in Ireland. It is a welcome deviation from more negative discourses of old age that often view older people in terms of dependency, isolation and loneliness. Throughout the discussion the contributions that older people make individually, and through a wide range of community activities, are discussed. Our attention is drawn to the importance of friendships and the nuanced manner in which older people actively value and sustain them. There is a visible focus on the ways older people interact with place and neighbourhoods, seeking to be active members of their communities by engaging in activities and contributing to a shared narrative. The part played by older people in the development and use of local services emphasises the many opportunities for interaction and the connectivity arising from formal and informal volunteering.

Whilst the research findings form a basis for optimism about the experience of ageing in Ireland, the book manages to present a credible picture that encompasses the many challenges that disproportionately affect some older people. Our attention is drawn to the class constraints presenting, especially for those on lower incomes, and those reliant on public transport. The variation of experience influenced by health status is also described as is, to a lesser extent, gender. The interaction of caring responsibilities with community engagement is also detailed. Here, again, we are not simply presented with a negative discourse of caring. While not denying the constraints it can impose, our attention is drawn to strategies employed by some older people who are carers, to make the most of the limited free time available.

Discussion is organised into nine chapters that focus on leisure and social activities; the meaning of place and significant communal settings; helping, volunteering and religious practice; relationships with family; friends and neighbours; explaining connectedness; and friendship. Together these chapters give a rich and nuanced account of the lives of older people, within a humanistic life-course perspective of ageing. Also included are chapters that detail the more common theoretical frameworks through which old age is understood,

bringing together views emanating from psychological, political economy, and sociological perspectives that are influential in informing views on ageing and older people. It also addresses issues relating to social policy, providing us with a comprehensive account of social policy directions in this area in Ireland.

Important questions are raised by the study for social policy and practice. The significance of neighbourhood and place (as opposed to connections based on age, for instance) is evident in this study. This underpins the importance of 'ageing in place' that is central to the ethos of community and home-based services. Here we are presented with a picture of quality of life that is contingent on community belonging and interaction, and high levels of volunteerism are identified. Together, community belonging and volunteerism pose challenges for individualistic and consumerist approaches to welfare provision. It is important that welfare provision does not reduce opportunities for social interaction. Perhaps this is most explicit in the description provided in this study of local authority sheltered housing design. Opportunities for interaction are confined by a bed-sit design with small kitchenettes that made some residents feel unable to have visitors in their home. Maintaining opportunities for community connectedness also needs to be addressed in policies about residential care provision. We question the 'wisdom' of locating care facilities for older people in green-belt areas outside of towns.

The significance of neighbourhood highlights the utility of services that specifically target older people and, in so doing, emphasise their difference and separateness from the community. Indeed, this is echoed in calls by some participants in this study for greater opportunities to interact with younger people. We are presented in this publication with a depiction of older people as active and as an important resource within their communities, for example through positive neighbouring and in maintaining a narrative of place. This questions the problematic tendency of traditional policy discourses to impose a sense of passivity by categorising older people in terms of their care needs. The observations made of various day-centres in this study highlight the need to move away from constructs of dependency towards more participatory, democratic services that recognise diversity of needs and lifestyles.

The study provides a broad yet detailed overview of the meaning of community life for older people and in so doing, throws up a number of avenues worthy of further research. For instance, it would be useful to examine the constraints on opportunity posed by gender and material deprivation that are discussed, in order to gain a more clear understanding of the interaction of class, gender and ageing in Ireland. Whilst an urban area was included in this sample, it would also be interesting, in view of the importance of geographical community, to examine the experience of inner-city regeneration and the emergence of urban sprawl from cities into rural regions, on older people long resident there. Perhaps most pressing, research is needed to examine how welfare provision and service delivery can be sensitive to

the needs of many older people to have meaningful community engagement. In particular, community connectedness as an essential component of quality of life should be taken into account in evaluations of services for older people with changed care needs that might make a person less able to leave his/her home independently or that may precipitate a move to residential care.

This publication thus provides a welcome perspective on older people's contributions to community life through an in-depth study of their activities and opinions as seen through two communities. Its content asks challenging questions regarding social policy and practice. In particular it challenges policies that view ageing mono-culturally and from dependency perspectives. Additionally, it can be viewed as a catalyst for further nuanced research on ageing.