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Connectedness in the Lives of Older People in Ireland

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Connectedness in the lives of older people in Ireland

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the connectedness of older people in two sample areas, one urban and one rural in Ireland. The paper is based on a study of the communal participation of older people in two geographic localities, Rathmore, a suburban area of Dublin, and Rathbeg, a rural area in County Donegal, conducted between 2000 and 2005. A multi stage study that used both qualitative and quantitative methods examined significant communal interactions of older people across a range of arenas, including leisure interests, involvement in clubs, religious practices, voluntary work, relationships with kin, friends and neighbours, helping activities, use of social services and informal interactions in neighbourhoods and other communal settings. The paper describes their experiences of connectedness, explains how older people co-create and sustain communal ties and explores the significance of social practices and social groupings involved. The study demonstrated that among a diverse group of older adults engagement with others outside one's immediate family was a significant source of satisfaction and meaning in life. It provided evidence that place-based friendships are important contexts for the development of collective solidarities and transformative relationships. The paper underlines the contribution of older people to the lives of others, and argues that community should be understood as involving both place and type of relationship instead of a symbolic attachment to identities. The policy implications of the findings are also briefly considered.

Key words – connectedness, community, enclaves of sociality, friendship

Introduction

This paper explores connectedness in the lives of older people in Ireland. Ageing and the problems associated with maintaining health and well-being in old age have become important topics in applied social research in Ireland. (See CARDI 2010 for summary of ageing research in Ireland). Relationships with kin are one of the principal ways in which older people are socially connected. An initial report of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) states that ‘families continue to be the most significant source of care for dependent older people in almost every country in the world’ (Barrett, Savva, Timonen, and Kenny 2011: 39). However, while the role of family is crucial and often the bedrock of support in old age, ties beyond the family are also important. It has been suggested that while families provide support they more rarely provide companionship. The role played by friends and neighbours in the support networks of older people has been highlighted and research has emphasised the value of friendship found in clubs, religious groups and public places (Wilmott 1987; Jerrome 1992).

The first set of findings on the health, lifestyles, well-being and financial situation of older people in Ireland based on a survey of over 8,000 Irish adults over 50 years which was launched in 2009 (TILDA) has presented a picture of strong family intergenerational support and social and community engagement (Barrett *et al.* 2011). These recent findings confirm the continued salience of high levels of contact with kin, friends and neighbours among older Irish people previously reported

(Whelan and Whelan 1988; Fahey and Murray 1994; Layte *et al.* 1999; O'Hanlon *et al.* 2005). A study on loneliness and social isolation in old age found that the majority of older Irish people are not socially isolated and are part of a locally integrated support network that includes family, friends and neighbours, as well as having some degree of participation in church, social groups and clubs (Treacy, Butler, Byrne *et al.* 2004: 175).

Much international research interest in recent decades has concentrated on conceptualising and measuring quality of life in old age. (See for example Mollenkopf and Walker 2007 for a review of research on quality of life in old age). However, the communal aspect of older people's lives is often overlooked with a tendency to focus on individual adjustment to old age or how successfully or otherwise individual older people manage ageing transitions. This paper seeks to build understanding of the nature of relationships that sustain people as they grow old and explores how relationships in communities have profound implications for well-being.

Aims

This paper sets out to describe and explain the nature of connectedness among older people in Ireland. It is based on a study of the participation of older people in their communities in two contrasting geographic locations, Rathmore, a suburban area in Dublin and Rathbeg, a rural village and its environs in the North-West of Ireland.¹ The study sought information on myriad aspects of older people's everyday lives in order to determine the relationships, social activities and commitments that were a source of meaning and satisfaction in their lives. Data was obtained on a range of social and leisure activities, religious practices, membership of clubs and groups, informal

neighbouring, helping activities, use of social services, friendships and contacts with significant others. A mixed-method research design was developed. The paper does not report on the detailed findings from the study, a full account of which can be found in Gallagher (2008). The selected findings are discussed within a theoretical framework that seeks understanding of connectedness in the norms and values that older Irish adults live by.

The aims of the paper are: firstly, to describe older adults' experiences of both connectedness and unconnectedness; secondly, to discuss the types of relationships and commitments that characterise connectedness among older people in contemporary Irish society; and thirdly, to explore the significance of socio-spatial relationships for meaning in later life.

The paper begins with discussion on the meaning of community and the importance of place-based friendships in the lives of older people. The study design and the methods used to understand and to measure connectedness in Rathmore and Rathbeg are explained. The nature of relatedness in communal settings is described, giving examples of social activities and settings. Attachment to place and norms and values associated with positive neighbouring are explored in the lives of the older inhabitants. The creation of a construct of connectedness which supports the ethnographic data is briefly explained. Since community participation is not easily captured by empirical indicators, there is less emphasis on variations in the older population in relation to participation patterns than in developing understanding of the types of relationships that conduce to well-being. Finally, some theoretical and policy implications related to ageing and well-being are discussed.

Theoretical approaches to connectedness

Contested views of community

In seeking to understand the nature of connectedness among older people in contemporary industrialised societies we are faced with contested concepts of community and different views of the moral organisation of the life course. Since community was introduced as a concept in the social sciences by Tonnies (1887, reprinted in 1967) in his seminal writing on community, the evolution of the concept has reflected historical changes in social relations and different moral and value stances in relation to the human condition, such as the need for both constancy and support of a community, as well as the desire for personal development and social change.

In contemporary discourses the moral dimension of community is often seen as residing in communities of interest or communities of identity.ⁱⁱ In relation to older people, Gilleard and Higgs have attached considerable importance to symbolic communities and communities of interest (Gilleard and Higgs 2005). They challenged the idea of older people as the ‘roots’ of communities – key elements of solidarity and continuity in a changing world - and contrasted this with the image of ‘modern retirees’ who enjoy the possibilities of choosing an alternative place and style of retirement (Gilleard and Higgs 2005: 129-130). At the same time, the authors recognise that neighbourhoods exercise an independent influence on health and social participation.

Social networks

Central to ideas about community and connectedness is the framework of social relationships that form the foundation for both personal and social integrity. The general change in the nature of kinship, and the increase in social and geographic mobility, have led researchers to use the concept of social networks to investigate the relationships that provide support, meaning and identity to older people (Allan 1996). Social network supports have been extensively examined in relation to older populations and there is a rich interdisciplinary literature on the health benefits of social contacts and support (Wenger 1989 and 1995; Bowling 1994; Keating *et al* 2002). The role that older people themselves play in providing both emotional and practical support within their network has been emphasised (Phillipson *et al.* 2001).

However, seeing each person's exchange and support network in terms of 'personal communities' as opposed to 'traditional communities' leaves significant gaps in conceptualising well-being. Such approaches cannot fully answer questions about the sense of obligation and commitment we feel towards particular ties, nor the importance of non-instrumental and non-intimate relationships in maintaining a sense of self and of solidarity with others. Therefore, a focus on networks can lead to an over emphasis on observable roles and overt exchanges, and can decontextualise the cultural and moral aspects of mutual obligations.

The importance of place

The extent to which the environment and specifically neighbourhood social capital influences health and well-being has become a focus of research. A national survey of older people in the United Kingdom which addressed the effects of neighbourhood social capital on their health found that positive perceptions of neighbourhood and of good quality facilities were associated with good self rated health and functioning. In contrast, perceived problems in the area were predictive of poorer self rated health (Bowling, Barber, Morris and Ebrahim 2006). Geographic place is an important mediator of meaning and sense of identity and not only in rural areas. Research in suburban Ireland found that a sense of attachment to locality was significant in shaping people's sense of belonging and sense of community in four suburban localities outside Dublin (Corcoran, Gray and Peillon 2007). Against the main thrust of the literature, the authors found that local residents were socially embedded in their respective localities.

Linking aspects of place and social ties suggests the importance of social values and communal interactions in contributing to well-being. Relationships in socio-spatial settings may have particular significance in the lives of older people amidst the multiple and layered relationships of their individual lives and life histories. From a public policy point of view the importance of communities of place is seen as vital for dependent people in relation to the constancy of support: 'It is noteworthy that dependent children, elderly persons and all other individuals whose lives and well-being are at great risk, need the support of communities whose

members do not or cannot choose arbitrarily to leave (Friedman 1992: 119). It has been argued that the services and supports necessary to give effect to such principles as 'ageing in place' have been slow to develop in Ireland (Layte *et al.* 1999; Garavan *et al.* 2001; O'Hanlon *et al.* 2005; O'Shea 2006). However, it is not only support that communities can provide but friendship.

Communal relations, friendship and obligation

The concept of friendship provides a rich conceptual field within which to explore the nature of communal relations in contemporary societies and to throw light on meaningfulness and satisfaction. However, some contemporary writers, such as Pahl, view friendship as having antithetical qualities to community, and depict individuals as having a changing cohort of significant others which they regard as an expression of freedom and choice (Pahl 2000). Ethnographic studies of older people in groups stress the importance of social clubs and church groups which are specific to places and traditions (Jerrome 1992). While Jerrome saw participation primarily in terms of a personal strategy for successful ageing, she stressed the importance of friendship as a major resource and she used the concept of 'social integrity' to explain the meaning behind participation (Jerrome 1992: 195). It is argued that as people get older the line between friends and neighbours becomes more blurred and the distinction between friendships based on similarity of interests and characteristics, as opposed to availability and general friendliness, becomes less important (Askham, Ferring and Lamura 2007).

The work of Abrams and Bulmer demonstrated that positive neighbouring is an important form of connectedness (Bulmer 1986). While Abrams linked positive

neighbouring with generalised reciprocity, Bulmer made the further suggestion that generalised reciprocity associated with strong neighbouring could develop into deep commitment and friendship (Bulmer 1986). Place based friendships can create a social world to which older people both contribute and derive benefits from. The extent to which different types of friendships in neighbourhood and community settings contributed to common moral understandings and created 'enclaves of sociality' is underlined in the study (Gallagher 2009).

Methodology

Choosing the research sites

The primary study site, Rathmore, is a suburban area of Dublin city about four miles north-east from the city centre. Rathmore can be described as a settled, suburban mixed social class area, comprising mainly lower-middle and upper-working class, home-owning residents. It has a total population of 12,700 people, is approximately 4 square miles in area and comprises housing estates, amenities of urban living, pleasant natural surroundings of parks and sea and accessible public transport. The vast majority of older residents had lived in Rathmore for at least 30 years and in almost all cases in the same house. Rathmore is not a natural community in a geographic sense nor would people living within its boundaries regard those boundaries as significant.ⁱⁱⁱ A locality was sought which had a higher than average proportion of older people (19.6% of the population living in Rathmore were aged 65 or over compared with 11.5% of the national population), relatively long-established

households, a social class mix, some sheltered housing for older adults and a range of services and activities that are used by older people such as clubs, day centres, pubs, churches and leisure amenities.

Rathbeg was chosen as the secondary research site because it provided a contrasting socio-geographic location to the main study area, the author already had relevant knowledge about the area and it was expected that access to key people and settings could be obtained. Rathbeg is situated in County Donegal, a county in the north-west corner of Ireland with a population of approximately 130,000. Rathbeg village itself has a population of 812, of whom 118 or 14.5 per cent are aged 65 or over (Central Statistics Office 1996).

Methods

A multi stage and multi method research strategy was adopted involving ethnographic observations, interviews and a survey. The principal methods used in the study were:

1. Ethnographic work was carried out in a range of communal settings in Rathmore and Rathbeg. Participant and non-participant observation was conducted in Senior Citizens' clubs, Active Retirement groups, day centres, voluntary groups, special interest groups, pubs, churches, social centres, community events and out and about on the streets.

2. An interview-based survey was conducted of 165 older people in Rathmore. The interviewers cold-called to a sample of houses in Rathmore on a random basis, and steps were taken to ensure that a quota of older people from all the principal

sociological categories was obtained. A small comparative survey was carried out in Rathbeg involving interviews with eight older people.

3. Twenty interviews were carried out with key informants in Rathmore and Rathbeg including social services and health care staff, volunteers, members of clubs, religious leaders and community activists.

4. Following preliminary analysis of the survey, two information meetings were held to give feedback to participants and to obtain their views on the patterns of responses.

The survey involved the development of an interview schedule designed as a creative and communicative research tool that yielded both quantitative and rich qualitative data. The interview schedule was constructed to be wide ranging over different aspects of social and communal life and contained a mix of closed and open questions. Ethical sensitivity was an important principle applied throughout the fieldwork. The interview schedule can be seen in Gallagher (2008: 323-346).

Analysis

Data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously during the research.

Ethnographic and descriptive survey data enabled us to describe communal participation in a way that illustrated its meaning in the lives of older people.

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data was developed in order to see how connectedness could be empirically measured as well as theoretically understood. Crosstabulation was used to analyse patterns of participation and the

factors related to different forms of participation. A number of variables were selected as indicators of connectedness and a tentative construct of how connected the respondents were was built from these indicators. The qualitative analysis is based on both study sites while the statistical analysis presented in the paper is based on the Rathmore sample.

Sample

The Rathmore sample of 165 participants contained almost equal numbers of younger elderly (65-74) and older elderly (75+). Fifty five percent of the sample were female while 45 per cent were male. Over one third (37 per cent) lived alone while 63 per cent co-resided. Of the total sample, 18 were resident in sheltered housing while the remainder lived in 'ordinary' housing in the community. The majority (just over 50 per cent) were married, 38 per cent were widowed, 9 per cent were single and 1 per cent were separated. There was a good social class mix, with about half belonging to the higher socio-economic groups and half to the lower socio-economic groups. The sample obtained was reasonably representative of the characteristics of the older population of Rathmore and no significant social group was left out.

Place, settings and sociality in Rathmore and Rathbeg

Social activities and settings

As one would expect among a heterogeneous group of older people there was great variability in leisure interests, and in type and extent of social engagement. About half of the Rathmore sample were a member of a group^{iv}, three quarters said they had a major interest^v and just over 70 per cent said there were events they did regularly for enjoyment or fun^{vi}. In contrast, there were people who were not attracted to group leisure activities, stating for example that ‘I am not a joiner’ or ‘I’m a home bird’. Others found it difficult to get involved: ‘I’m kind of shy...I’d prefer if someone would take me to something’. Some disliked the idea of older people socialising together including a widow who said she deliberately chose not to join the Widows’ Association: ‘Mix with young people if you can...I don’t agree with older people together...’. An emphasis on independence and autonomy was evident in the following statement by a male respondent: ‘I don’t know ... I think there is too much “we’ll all get together and be happy” – we were reared to be independent in my day’.

A range of social and communal settings – sport and social clubs, churches, voluntary groups, day centres, pubs, special interest groups and community events – were important contexts for meaningful engagement. About one third went to the pub on some sort of regular basis, while about one quarter played an outdoor sport, typically golf. Bingo was played by about 10 per cent while smaller proportions were involved with musical or dance groups. Sixteen per cent said they participated in social activities centred on a club or social group for older people. Special interest activities such as art, singing, music, dancing, creative writing and local history

provided an important social and creative outlet for many older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg. Fun, sociability and learning characterised such groups. One respondent in Rathbeg gave insight in to what participation in a local art group meant to her:

It has meant a big change in my life. I never did any art at school ... But I went to the art class just to get away [from a stressful caring situation]... and I enjoyed it. We had an exhibition and at the first exhibition I sold a picture. And that really set me going, it was a great boost to my morale. Anyway, I keep it up. I enjoy it. I'm not an artist nor never will, but I enjoy dabbling and I enjoy the company ... and we have great fun (Interview in Rathbeg, March 01).

Activities that may be thought of as less developmental such as going to the pub and bingo are also significant in creating satisfaction and solidarities. A study visit to a pub in Rathmore revealed that older people went there during the day for different purposes. For an older married couple their local pub was a resting post while doing their grocery shopping while retired men went there to read the paper or meet friends. An older male informant who goes to that pub every day said that the informal conversations were principally about sport, social welfare matters, politics and 'gossip'. A group of men play a regular game of dominoes. While most would drink alcohol, some retired men go to the pub to meet male friends over a cup of coffee. Observations and informal discussion about pubs in the study areas confirmed that the pub is an important social outlet for older men in particular, to which older people can 'amble down', which engenders 'social ease' and which may be 'an underrated resource'.

While the social benefits of Bingo have been acknowledged (Hicks and Stone 2007), Bingo is often represented as a pastime of little relevance. For example, it has been criticised for dominating activity programmes in older people's clubs and day centres (O Sullivan 2003: 52). Observations of and conversations about bingo going in both Rathmore and Rathbeg revealed that it involved important processes of sociability, including acknowledgement of others and non-overt forms of helping. An example observed in Rathbeg was of help given to an older man who had difficulty marking his card due to deteriorating eyesight. This was done in a quiet way that did not embarrass the person being helped, and enabled him to continue to play bingo even when faculties of sight and hearing had deteriorated. In numerous ways bingo helped to promote social inclusion and social connectedness, and helped to maintain social integrity for some older people in the face of increasing frailty (Gallagher 2008: 172-4).

Religious practice was strong and significant in the lives of older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg and high levels of regular church attendance were reported (Gallagher 2008: 194-195). The significance of cultural practices involving greeting and conversing with others in one's locality whom one does not know intimately was emphasised throughout the study. Many daily interactions in neighbourhoods expressed connectedness, for example watching football matches in the local park, having a chat with someone when you are in your garden, or meeting people on the way to the shops or at Mass. One respondent who attended daily Mass said:

I get up at 7.00 every morning. I know the people who live around [name of area]. After Mass every morning we have a chat. I meet fellas, hear the news, what's going on ... they're well up to date on everything. One man I speak to – I don't

know his name – I chat about Gaelic football with a neighbour on the [name of road] and I don't know his name (Interview in Rathmore, July 2002).

While greeting others whom one does not know particularly well, or having a chat with a fellow spectator at a local match do not involve active engagement or reciprocal relationships, arguably such forms of social intercourse are important for generating a sense of solidarity and belonging. This can be thought of as generalised friendship which corresponds with a form of 'distributed intimacy' identified by Edmondson in her ethnographic work in the West of Ireland (Edmondson 2001: 68).

Social interaction does not need to be purposive or activity based to engender meaningful participation or to produce socially beneficial outcomes. Even participation in an Active Retirement group could suit people who had a quiet disposition and were not outgoing. An organiser of an Active Retirement Association (ARA) in Rathmore spoke about how she encouraged participation:

I have to show I'm enthusiastic and draw them in. I tell people 'Right, come along, there's lots of different activities and you don't have to take part [actively].' Some people just like to feel part of the group, just to sit and listen and not feel lonely (Interview with Secretary of ARA, 17 September, 2003).

Likes and dislikes about their locality

Particularistic attachment to social group, neighbourhood or place are essential ingredients in understanding the nature of sociality. Rathmore and Rathbeg represent two different types of geographic communities, yet similar norms and value

frameworks guided the lives of older people in both areas. When respondents in Rathmore were asked what they liked and disliked about their locality all but a handful of respondents named at least one aspect they liked while only about one third named an aspect they disliked. The positive aspects most frequently mentioned (ranked in order) were:

- *convenient facilities and amenities;*
- *friendliness and nice neighbours;*
- *having nice physical surroundings;*
- *a sense of peace and security;*
- *familiarity of place.*

Comments made included: ‘Neighbours ... we can totally depend on each other’; ‘People in the area are so kind, considerate and helpful ... we’ve no problems’; ‘We have all grown old together ... reared our children together’; ‘I could not imagine living anywhere else’. Having access to a park or a green facilitated important social contact for a number of respondents. One man spoke about ‘enjoying [watching] the football in the green at this time of year’. There was a sense of knowing one’s surroundings and of having long-standing relationships with neighbours. But it was also the significance of memories and shared experiences associated with an earlier stage of adult life.

While the majority of respondents found nothing they disliked about their locality, the two aspects most frequently disliked by those who mentioned something negative were *problems with traffic* and *crime/vandalism*. The problems with traffic did not just apply to one area and included difficulties trying to cross the road or driving in and out of their houses due to parked cars causing obstruction. Concerns

over crime referred to joyriding, vandalism, rowdiness associated with pubs in the area and break-ins. The different range of social problems concentrated in some areas more than others drew attention to class segregation in Rathmore – an aspect we do not pursue in this paper. It was noted that most of the concerns about anti-social behaviour were associated with one particular locality. Interviews with service providers indicated that there was little for older people in this area and that many had little motivation to get involved in social activities. One voluntary worker in this area suggested that: ‘older people are looked after materially but not communally’.

In Rathbeg respondents also said they liked the friendliness of people and the peace and tranquillity they experienced there. As regards dislikes, several of the respondents referred to the lack of a community centre in Rathbeg^{vii}. The aspects of their locality enjoyed and appreciated by older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg - facilities and amenities, the natural environment and friendly and helpful neighbours resonate with the key themes identified by Corcoran *et al.* from the literature as being crucial in establishing a basis for attachment to place: the backdrop of the built and natural environment, the culture of place, elective belonging and associational life (Corcoran, Gray and Peillon, 2007: 180).

Values and neighbouring

In both Rathmore and Rathbeg the ethnographic work revealed a vast reservoir of solidarities and sympathetic knowledge about the lives of others. Positive neighbouring was strongly evident in both Rathmore and Rathbeg. Older people both gave each other and received considerable amounts of practical help, and helping activities contributed to satisfaction with life both for givers and receivers. About 30

per cent of the study population in Rathmore did voluntary work; 40 per cent said they helped someone outside their own household^{viii}, while 14.5 per cent said they received informal help with daily tasks from someone outside their household. Neighbours were the most frequent recipients of the respondents' informal help, followed by their own children or grandchildren. Help which the study participants gave to their neighbours ranged from providing companionship and giving lifts to personal care and house-maintenance tasks^{ix}. Many people spoke about the practical help and support they received from neighbours in their day-to-day lives.

Volunteering occurred through churches, charitable organisations, social clubs and community development activities and older people had a major and sometimes prime presence in many voluntary organisations. Participation in social groups was associated with positive values. Indeed, it appeared that a plurality of groups enhanced people's experience of connectedness. Many volunteers displayed strong Christian and humanistic values and demonstrated that they were attuned to the lives of others in their localities. One of the main organisers of an initiative to develop sheltered housing and day care facilities in the environs of Rathbeg spoke about his reasons for taking on the task:^x

I saw lovely older people who felt in the way in their own homes ... Rejection is the worst thing that can happen to anyone ... I wanted to make sure people felt wanted again and never feel a nuisance. They feel they are important now – instead of a nursing home they got a new life and made new friends (Interview in Rathbeg, August 2003).

In addition to overt forms of helping, there were many examples of older people giving encouragement to each other in unobtrusive ways that demonstrated kindness and understanding. This was more than general valuing of good neighbours or feelings of general good will towards those in one's locality. In one neighbourhood in Rathmore, a group of women looked after their neighbour who was developing symptoms of dementia by supporting her to continue normal social interaction. They did this by unobtrusively monitoring her movements in the neighbourhood and inviting her to accompany them on short trips to the shops and to social events. They encouraged her to continue to host a small prayer service in her home and then helped her to provide hospitality at it (Gallagher 2008: 298).

Analysing connectedness

Indicators of connectedness

A construct of connectedness was created by selecting variables that appeared to indicate a significant form of engagement with others in one's locality. To see to what extent the quantitative data supported findings from the qualitative analysis five variables were selected that appeared to represent connectedness. The variables selected were:

1. Whether or not the respondent was a member of a club or group.
2. Whether or not the respondent did voluntary work.
3. Whether or not the respondent gave help to anybody outside their household.

4. Whether or not there were events that the respondent did regularly for enjoyment or fun, and
5. Whether or not a week would go by without the respondent visiting someone or receiving a visitor.

Scores were dichotomised in relation to each variable and cumulated giving a quantitative overview of the sample in relation to degree of connectedness.

(The frequencies for the 5 items in the index are shown at Table 1. It should be noted that the sample size is small and that the analysis below is used to suggest possibilities for further empirical investigation).

The less connected and more connected respondents

The following examines the characteristics of those in the Rathmore sample who were least connected, most connected and the majority of the sample who were connected on some indicators and not on others. Only two of the 165 respondents in Rathmore (1.2 per cent) had low scores on all five indicators, that is they were not members of any club or group, they did not do voluntary work, they did not give help to anyone outside their household, there was no event that they did regularly for enjoyment or fun and they did not visit or receive a visit at least once a week. When we excluded the question on visiting (which had an uneven frequency distribution) we found that 16 respondents (9.7 per cent) had low scores on four indicators. The most striking characteristic of the less connected group was that of poor health as subjectively rated – 13 of the 16 (81.3 per cent) said their health was fair or bad. Half of the unconnected group were functionally impaired in relation to a number of tasks of daily living – a much higher proportion than in the total sample. Two thirds of this

group were aged 75 or over compared with half in the total sample. Half of this group were widowed which was significantly more than in the total sample where approximately 38% were widowed.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that this group of 16 respondents whom we have described as less connected were unconnected with their family, had no contact with neighbours or friends, or were necessarily uninterested in what happens in the wider community. When we re-examined the interview data from the so-called unconnected group, the picture of their individual lives revealed greater diversity and greater complexity in relation to their experiences of sociability and solidarity than the above analysis might suggest. Almost all had at least weekly contact with their families and those who had children said that their children gave them assistance with practical tasks where this was needed. What was particularly striking was how many commented positively about their neighbours – eight respondents (half of them) from the unconnected group spoke spontaneously about friendly and helpful neighbours with comments such as: ‘People care about one another here’. There was variation in whether friends and neighbours visit. To some extent not visiting among friends and neighbours seemed to be related to poor mobility, coping with illness or disability, or onerous caring responsibilities. A degree of boredom and loneliness was not surprisingly associated with inactivity. While the two least connected respondents experienced considerable loneliness and lack of fulfilment in their lives, this was not the universal experience of the 16 less connected individuals.

Thus, being described as ‘less connected’ must not be conflated with being lonely or being dissatisfied with one’s life or lacking empathy. Yet, there are important lessons for policy makers here that suggest a need for interventions without

intrusiveness and the importance of having access to a range of cultural and social amenities and social services that one may choose or not to avail of.

When we selected respondents who were connected on each of the five indicators we found a total of 17 respondents (10.3 per cent of the total sample). These were people who were a member of a club or group, who did voluntary work, who helped someone outside their own household, who said there were events that they did regularly for enjoyment or fun and who were involved in visiting at least once a week. These people almost unanimously described their health as good or very good (16 out of 17). All 17 (100 per cent) of the most connected group had a major interest and enjoyment of life was very evident among them. Those who were most connected engaged in a wide variety of interests and social activities that included hobbies, voluntary work and family commitments, and they appeared to be contented with their lives. While a number of the respondents had specialist interests and roles in organisations external to their locality, for the vast majority their voluntary and leisure activities occurred in their general locality.

A number of the most connected respondents demonstrated altruism and practical social concern through their voluntary work in their locality. For example, two residents living in sheltered housing complexes worked consistently through their respective Residents' Associations to improve the general physical and social environment of the complex. They demonstrated an awareness of the needs of others, they had a strong religious commitment and they derived satisfaction from their voluntary work. Many of this group were physically active in sport and many were also interested in travel and spoke about forthcoming holidays. From a public policy perspective such people represent an important resource through their involvement in and contribution to civil society groups.

Leaving aside those who were strongly connected or relatively unconnected, what was particularly noteworthy was that the vast majority were connected on some indicators; four-fifths of the sample scored positively on between two and four of the five indicators: membership of a group, doing voluntary work, helping someone outside one's household, enjoying regular social activities and being involved in regular visiting. This underlined that it was not essential to be a 'joiner', a 'helper' or a 'volunteer' to be connected. Much helping was done unobtrusively and informally and many people who were not involved in groups of any kind or in volunteering had close supportive relationships with neighbours and friends.

Understanding connectedness

The ethnographic work which underpins the analysis revealed a relational landscape rooted in geographic place and social settings where the participants themselves co-created the satisfying relationships experienced. Settings such as clubs, churches and informal neighbouring groups constituted enclaves of sociality where tolerance and other-regarding behaviour was fostered. The strong moral element suggested in people's own understanding of communal engagement was an important theme in the study. It was apparent that older people themselves understood the importance of these aspects of communal life in contributing to their own and other people's well-being. Social values which were often embedded in religious beliefs but expressed in daily interactions gave rise to forms of friendships which helped sustain people as they aged. The links between religious beliefs/practices and social connectedness in the lives of the study participants is examined further in Gallagher (2009). Community and friendship are inextricably intertwined in the lives of the study participants.

Conclusion

The study examined social practices and community participation among older people in an urban and a rural location in Ireland. The study threw light on how older people live in their neighbourhoods, how they interact and how they express their sociality. The study revealed a rich landscape of relatedness consisting of multidimensional relationships based on kinship and friendship. Through their social practices and moral values based on Christian and humanistic traditions, older people sustain communal ties, thereby creating meaningfulness in their own lives and enhancing the lives of others around them.

The vast majority of elders in the study are connected within vibrant informal ties of neighbouring, church and community settings. Communal interactions through leisure activities, helping activities, voluntary work, religious practices and informal relations help to create social and moral worlds where people experience a sense of belonging, involvement and fulfilment. A plurality of groups and social practices contribute to well-being. While there was a sense in which each individual in the study had her or his own personal community and unique configuration of social interactions, the web of relationships and matrix of connectors represent a social reality that pervades geographical localities and intermediate level groups, and that can best be understood in cultural terms. Social capital is viewed as conceptually distinct from the social network attributes of individuals and this has implications for the types of policies needed to support well-being among older people.

The study demonstrates the value of certain activities and groups in civil society, and provides tools that help to identify possibilities for greater social and cultural integration of older people. It has been argued that older people, regardless of

limitations of physical or mental capacity, must have the opportunity to remain involved with others and engaged in meaningful interaction (O'Shea 2003; Gallagher 2006). This suggests the importance of seeking to create 'community-ness' and 'enclaves of sociality' in a plurality of groups and settings to enable older people to experience reciprocal relationships and to become part of wider networks of caring, tolerance and creativity.

Service providers and policy makers must recognise the holistic nature of well-being and the enormous value added to people's lives by neighbourhood social groups and clubs. The existence of networks of support and volunteering should not, however, be taken for granted. The deep reservoirs of practical social concern and support in neighbourhoods and communities must be cultivated by offering consistent support to local level groups, supporting community development endeavours and drawing on the resources of older people themselves. This demands leadership, vision, resourcefulness and celebration of what constitutes a good old age and good communities. Public policy must draw lessons from the many examples of good local services and groups focused on older people but embedded in the community where genuine authentic relationships are experienced.

At the same time we must acknowledge that there are clear challenges facing Irish society in maintaining the types of values and norms that appear to sustain people as they age. Strong religious practice, stakeholding and identity in a locality and strong family, kinship, friendship and neighbouring bonds were central to the moral consensus and solidarity that exists among the older population in places like Rathmore and Rathbeg. However, changes in religious practice, increased diversification, economic challenges and individualistic lifestyles have all altered what is held to be of value in Irish society at the beginning of the second decade of the

21st century. Yet, the lives of older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg demonstrate the cultural resources that are vital to personal and community well-being. By valuing and seeking to foster such resources the lives of all age groups in Irish society could be enhanced.

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Table 1: Frequencies index of connectedness variables

Variable	%		n
	Yes	No	
Member of club or group	51.0	49.0	163
Engaged in voluntary work	29.3	70.7	164
Gives informal help outside own household	40.0	60.0	165
Enjoyed regular events	70.0	30.0	164
Visits or receives a visit at least once a week	87.5	12.5	165

Notes

ⁱ 'The Participation of Older People in their Communities', PhD study, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2005. Rathmore and Rathbeg are fictitious names.

ⁱⁱ The symbolic construction of community has been examined by Cohen (1985), while Young (1990) developed a feminist critique of the oppressive nature of traditional understandings of community.

ⁱⁱⁱ The study area chosen, Rathmore, was composed of four adjoining District Electoral Divisions. The District Electoral Division was the smallest administrative unit for which population statistics were available.

^{iv} The main groups were church groups, sports clubs, community development groups, charitable groups, active retirement and special interest groups.

^v The most common major interests in order were: reading, watching sport on television, participating in sport, gardening, current affairs, family related domestic work, art and craft/DIY work, music, voluntary commitments, travel and television.

^{vi} The principal types of events enjoyed were, in order: social occasions and meeting friends, sport and outdoor activities, special interest activities, family occasions, shopping/going to town and individual home-based activities.

^{vii} In 2006 a new Social Activity Centre opened in Rathbeg that operates as both a day centre for older people and as a community centre for social events.

^{viii} The levels of formal and informal help which the respondents said they give are somewhat higher than rates reported in the initial findings of the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). This may reflect higher levels of connectedness in Rathmore than in other localities. However, as indicated, the Rathmore sample is small.

^{ix} Visiting was the most frequently mentioned helping activity, for example visiting a neighbour who had reduced mobility or visiting a neighbour in hospital. Tasks done for neighbours ranged from instrumental help to more general 'watch and ward' activities. Instrumental help given included doing household chores, doing errands such as collecting medical prescriptions, carrying household refuse bins in and out, giving lifts, looking after a pet, shopping, providing a meal, and doing maintenance jobs such as gardening or repair work. Many spoke about helping if a neighbour was ill.

^x This was a joint initiative between a local voluntary group and the Health Service Executive to develop supported housing and a day centre. As well as being impressed by the facility itself which reflected vision, commitment and energetic work on the part of the informant, the author was also struck by the warmth and friendship she observed between the informant and the older people using the centre.