Rural: A good place to grow old?

Dr Peter Orpin
On behalf of the Utas Rural Ageing Research Team
Ageing Well

• **Multiple terms** used interchangeably but with slightly different connotations:
  – Positive Ageing
  – Healthy Ageing
  – Productive Ageing
  – Successful Ageing

• **Common goal**: ensure people live life as fully as possible, for as long as possible, despite the challenges of ageing – included, engaged, contributing

• Driven by a **common concern/agenda**: the ‘looming problem’ of an ageing population:
  – Falling Old Age Dependency Ratio: 2007 = 20% (5:1) → 2056 = 38-42%(<3:1) [Australian Bureau of Statistics]
  – Growing cost of health and aged care provision
Don't let aging get you down. It's too hard to get back up!
Positive Ageing Strategies

Multiple easily accessible local, state and federal government models out there; all with the same basic elements\(^1,2\):

**Strategic Aim:** Build capacity

- Individual - physical, cognitive and social-cultural
- Community - social capital
- Socio-environmental conditions – policy, infrastructure, resources

1. Drawn from West Tamar, Glenorchy City and Tasmanian State Productive Ageing Strategies

2. There is little in any of these strategies that is specific to the older person – these are the facilitators for living a full life - regardless of age and life circumstance
Key Individual Factors

- Life-course – layering new challenges onto pre-existing disadvantage
- Manage risks of, and impact from disease and disability – health behaviours (SNAP), chronic disease self-management, active body, mind and spirit
- Mobility/transport
- Meaningful engagement and participation – reciprocity, usefulness, hope
- Financial security
- Safety and security
- Choice and control
- Information
- Food security
- Housing security
Key Community/Socio-environmental Factors

• Socio-cultural
  – Inclusivity
  – Ageism

• Infrastructure
  – Access
  – Support services
  – Transport
  – Safety/Security
  – Information
  – Housing
Researching ‘ageing well’ in the rural setting

Two surprising gaps in the research literature:

1. The lived experience of ageing (in any context)
2. Rural ‘community’

- Lots of ‘common’ knowledge, anecdote, stereotype and myth; BUT,
- A weak and patchy empirical evidence base
Rural Ageing Research Team

• **Prof. Judi Walker**  Professor of Rural Health (Monash – formerly University of Tasmania)

• **Dr Peter Orpin**  Senior Research Fellow University of Tasmania (and ‘older’ Australian)

• **Ms Kim Boyer**  Senior Research Fellow University of Tasmania (former senior bureaucrat turned researcher)

• And a large supporting cast
Major Projects

• Cradle-Coast Pilot (2005-2007)
  – Two interviews 18 months apart with approx. 200 older people (65+) on NW Coast to explore service usage and needs

• ARC Linkage Grant: Community Engagement for Productive Ageing 2007-2011
  – In-depth interviews with 69 rural community dwelling people 65+ across three rural local government area in Tasmania (Central Highland, Circular Head and West Coast)
  – Interview/focus groups with 32 service providers in the study areas
  – Interviews with 11 DHHS managers
  – Aims:
    • To explore the age-related challenges to social engagement and participation in a rural context
    • To inform the design and delivery of policies and services to support older rural people to maintain their preferred levels of social engagement into old age.

• Healthy Eating Healthy Ageing (2 HACC funded projects)
  1. Explore models of government provided meals for older people
  2. To explore a whole-of-community approach to supporting healthy eating among older residents.
The voice of the older rural person
Some insights into the lived experience of ageing
The Experience of Ageing

• Ageing as a natural process not a pathology:
  – Normalised by older rural participants (ORPs) as one more step on a life’s journey.
  – It can’t be cured [and they don’t expect it to be] - need to address the pathologies without pathologising the aged or the process
  – Service providers conceive of ageing largely in terms of disability and need – for most ORPs these may be distracting facts of life but are not defining of them and their lives.
  – Need to recognise and acknowledge the resilience and coping skills of older people: focus on ‘support to’ rather than ‘caring for’
  – Reluctant help-acceptors – approach with due respect
A Life Trajectory (Human ecology*) Approach

• Each individual experience of ageing presents as a unique product of:
  – A life trajectory – challenges of ageing layered onto a life history
  – The nature and extent of challenges – poor predictor of ageing well
  – The individual – personality, psychosocial and material resources
  – The context – a time, a place, a history
  – Processes of meaning making and agency
    • Making sense of change – match to expectations critical
    • Adaptive compensation: Active resilience ← → passive defeatism

• Individualised experience requires individualised interventions grounded in relationships and based on an understanding of, and sensitivity, to the individual.

• Policies and services need to continually evolve to reflect different cohorts in different environments – baby boomers
The Challenges of Ageing

Largely defined by change and loss:

• Of health – but not necessarily well-being

• Of capacity, especially:
  – Mobility – personal and spatial
    • Loss of licence or licence holder - Greater consequences in rural setting with no public transport, loss of traditional support structures and dispersed infrastructure
  – Energy – threat to continued viability of cherished community organisations and infrastructure through diminished contribution.
  – Exacerbated by high demand carer roles
    • Time and energy demands
    • Decay of social networks and social skills

• Of significant others through death and outmigration
  – Loss of spousal and/or confidants
  – Scattered families
  – Disruption of multi-generational cross family ties
The Challenges of Ageing

• Of traditional support structures
  – Changing employment patterns – especially women
  – Outmigration – especially younger generations
  – Incomers – support structures left behind in place of origin

• Of important social roles and functions
  – Connections
  – Sense of meaning, identity, contribution and control

• Of familiar social and cultural norms, forms and activities
  – Changing community structures and activities – not necessarily less but different
  – Incomers especially those seeking more affordable living
  – IT related change

A shrinking social world – declining engagement with age
Coping with the challenges

• Ageing experience as a reflection of a life trajectory

• Participants found to be (by and large):
  – Accepting, modest expectation
  – Resilient – ‘Just get on with it. What else can you do’
  – Stoic, self-reliant – reluctant help-seekers

• Winding back of engagement to an extent an adaptive response to declining capacity:
  – Volitional, welcome and adaptive

• Adaptive Compensation – extracting greater value out of preserved:
  – Networks/engagement (Socio-emotional selectivity Theory Carstensen 1992)
  – Energy and capacity – (Selective optimisation with compensation Baltes and Baltes 1990)
  – Opportunities

• Subjective measures (attitudes towards, match to expectations) better predictor of coping than objective (health, networks, support)
  – A life-span perspective on of (perceived) support and health Uchino 2009
Vulnerabilities

• Psycho-social
  – A coherent sense of self — Continuity Theory Atchley 1989
  – A sense of meaning and usefulness
  – Reciprocity – giving and receiving
  – Control
  – Privacy
  – A sense of place and belonging

• Environment and Infrastructure
  – Inclusion
  – Mobility/access
  – House and home
  – Cherished organisations and institutions
  – Support structures
A Caution

This research is largely a reflection of a particular time, place and cohort. Who knows how coming ageing cohorts such baby boomers and/or ‘sea’ and ‘tree changers’ will:

• Experience ageing?
• React to that experience?
Issues for rural aged research*

• Lack of clarity around definitions of rural
  – In Australia, official categorisation (ASGC-RA) on purely spatial and access measures – no socio-cultural element
• Tendency to over-generalise rural – lump together otherwise disparate studies
• Overemphasis of rural-urban difference – ignore similarities and other more powerfully discriminate variables
• Absence of qualitative (and small area statistical) research
  – Large scale aggregate data glosses over within-rural variation
  – Socio-cultural understanding dominated by popular narrative and unexamined stereotype
• Failure to acknowledge change

What do we know about rural that might impact on rural ageing? – Disadvantages

• Based on large scale data sets – glosses over extremes e.g. Indigenous/remote - gentrified peri-urban.

• **Baseline health** – statistically poorer than urban (AIHW)
  – More and more disabling chronic disease
  – Engage in more risky health behaviours – occupational and recreational
  – Utilise less primary health care services
  – Die younger – misadventure, acute and end-stage chronic

• **Demography**
  – Older, and ageing faster
  – Missing ‘middle’ demographic – young and early middle-age
Disadvantages?

• Resources
  – Socio-economic – fewer economic resources – income, housing, equity
  – Formal Social Capital - Lower levels of secondary and post-secondary education and credentialled occupational skills
  – Technology – lag behind urban in take-up and skills development around emerging technologies
Disadvantage?

- **Distance, mobility and access** – more limited choice and more difficult access to:
  - Services and infrastructure
  - Socialisation, transport/mobility, occupational and recreational opportunities all constrained by distance and economies of scale
  - Aged Care Provision: viability and sustainability constrained by high costs (establishment and running) and staffing difficulties
  - Lessening of choice; partly driven, and largely addressable by, IT development – compound problem for those low in IT take-up and familiarity
  - Note: The degree to which choice and access are issues depends very much on individual resources and expectations.
What do we know about rural that might impact on rural ageing? – Advantages?

Note: the majority of these:

• Are strongly and popularly held perceptions
• Lack sound empirical evidence – difficult to measure with rigour – little rigorous research since Dempsey’s 1990 Small Town
• Can be a ‘two-edged’ sword depending on the relationship between:
  – The individual – social and cognitive traits, history;
  – The time – rapid change;
  – The place; and,
  – The issue.
Advantages? - Community

• Inclusion/belonging [Exclusion]
  – Strongly felt and pivotal to ageing well
    • esp. for long time residents
    • Under threat from social and economic change
  – Takes time (multi-generational?) to develop real depth
  – Lived versus imagined/constructed belonging

• Support
  – Strong – if you fit
  – Dominated by family
  – Threatened by out-migration
  – Doubts over incomers
  – Reluctant help-acceptors - importance of independence, personal space and reciprocity
  – Risks associated with lack of privacy and stigma
  – Strong normative pressure – transgression brings exclusion
Advantages? – Social and Cultural Resources

- Networks and Engagement
  - Strong for long termers – questions over incomers
  - High social visibility and surveillance – pluses and minuses
- Resilience (self-sufficiency, stoicism)
  - Cohort rather than (purely) rural effect? – ‘proved in the fire’
  - Flipside - fatalism and reluctant help-seeking
- Environment
  - Healthy – amenity, safety, physicality
  - Unhealthy – work environment and practices, environmental stress
- Safety
  - Strong perceptions
  - Hazardous environments, poor infrastructure
Rural Change

- Popular narrative of decline and widening urban-rural disparity

- Research suggests:
  - Increasing diversity, greater spread within urban-remote continuum
  - A limited number of rural communities in economic and population decline or at significant risk
    - Higher RA index
    - Heavily reliant on a single industry – e.g. agriculture, mining, manufacture
    - Low amenity
  - Many rural communities showing economic, social and population growth
    - Especially coastal and peri-urban (commuting and short trip tourism)
    - High amenity – townscapes, landscapes, recreational, cultural/historical
    - Regional hubs
    - Diversified industry including tourism and niche agriculture
Rural Change – Counter-urbanisation/Incomers

- Sea’ and ‘Tree’ changers
- Commuters – limit on local embedment
- Economic refugees
- Driving rural change – cultural churn
  - First two with greater resources – economic, educational, mobility, agency
  - Estimated numbers vary widely and distribution uneven but high impact on destination areas
  - Commodification of rurality and rural culture – elite consumption and cost structures
  - Community activism – reconstructing community
  - Blurring the urban-rural boundaries
  - Doubtful ‘embeddedness’
Rural Change – Impact on Ageing

The ‘two speed’ community

• Long term older rural residents:
  – Lack of economic and educational resources balanced by:
    • Deep local networks (esp. family), sense of belonging and supports
    • Undemanding stoicism and self-reliance – reluctant help-seeking
  – Challenges (apart from ageing itself):
    • Eroding connections and support bases (esp. family) and familiar forms and norms
    • Difficulties maintaining traditional community organisations

• Incomers
  – More resources (educational, financial cultural) and greater agency – increasing choice
  – More mobile and flexible but lack of deep local support bases, esp. family
Rural: A good place to grow old?

Depends:

• On who you are
• On your place in the community
• On your resources:
  – Personal
  – Family
  – Community
You can always try denial!

"One senior and one refuses to accept he's a senior."

One senior and one refuses to accept he’s a senior
Still – there comes a time

For some reason, these new birds didn’t seem as interested in William’s bird seed.