

MONOGRAPHIC SECTION:

Diverse Geographies of Rural Ageing

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*Editorial Introduction:
Diverse Geographies of Rural Ageing*



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Diverse Geographies of Rural Ageing

Demographic ageing has come to be one of the defining narratives of the twenty-first century (Skinner, Cloutier and Andrews, 2015; Skinner, Andrews and Cutchin, 2018). It is now well established that, in most Global North contexts, rural communities, spaces and places are ageing faster than urban areas. This is the outcome of a complex interaction between demographic and socio-economic processes that are spatially uneven at local, regional, national and supra-national scales. The consequences of rural demographic ageing are many and varied, with implications for individuals, households, and communities, and for both local and national governments (Davis, Crothers, Grant, Young and Smith, 2012; Doheny and Milbourne, 2017). Rural ageing research has a long history (for overviews see: Hanlon and Skinner, 2016; Skinner and Winterton, 2018). The papers comprising this Special Issue reflect this history but are also illustrative of a growing scholarly interest in rural ageing and geographical perspectives that are increasingly being linked with gerontology and ageing studies (Skinner *et al.*, 2015, 2018). These linkages are becoming known as *geographical gerontology*, the body of work engaged with the spatial dimensions of ageing, old age and older populations (Skinner *et al.*, 2018).

Based on contributions made by researchers at the XXVII Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology (2017) and the 2018 Nordic Ruralities Conference, this Special Issue brings together a collection of papers that report

findings from recently concluded and ongoing research conducted in Belgium, England, Canada and Australia.

The first two contributions are concerned with how healthy ageing in place can be fostered in rural areas witnessing demographic ageing. Morris and Halseth's paper is primarily concerned with rural housing. Volckaert, De Decker and Schillebeeckx consider the importance of service provision and informal care as facilitators of ageing *in situ*. Combined these papers illustrate how local housing and labour markets can create contexts that may not be conducive to sustaining a good quality of life for older adults who chose to age in place. They also identify the importance of local services and facilities, including the accessibility of formal and informal care, to creating an environment within which an ageing rural population can achieve a good quality of life without having to relocate.

Morris and Halseth draw upon work undertaken in British Columbia, Canada, the *Northern BC Housing Study*. This paper focuses on an illustrative case study, 100 Mile House, a town in the resource frontier region of North America. Here the legacy of in-migration of a working age population in the 1950s – 1970s followed by a decline in the industries that attracted workers thereafter has created a community populated by individuals who have aged *in situ*. Some areas are attracting retirement or amenity migrants, but the overall demographic picture is one of demographically ageing communities. Local housing markets are dominated by properties that were designed for families, commonly with accommodation spread over multiple levels. Residential housing is of an age where renovations and upgrades are required, including a need to make homes more energy efficient. Attending to this work is costly and beyond the financial reach of many retired occupants. Few affordable and appropriately configured alternatives exist within local housing markets to cater for the housing needs of an ageing population. Facilitating the development of a more age-appropriate housing stock is, as recounted in the paper, not without its challenges but without more suitable housing units becoming available rural communities will struggle to support those who wish to age in place.

Based on research conducted in two different types of rural area – work rich and work poor – in Flanders, Belgium, the contribution from Volckaert, De Decker and Schillebeeckx also highlights a lack of age appropriate housing in rural contexts. However, the focus of their paper is how informal care contributes to the quality of life of older rural populations in work rich and work poor areas. Provided by adult children and neighbours, informal care such as lift giving or doing the grocery shopping can be enough to allow older adults to remain living independently in their own home. In work-poor rural areas especially, older adults are increasingly unlikely

to have an adult child living close by who can undertake informal care activities on a regular basis. Older adults who live in isolated dwellings, without immediate neighbours, or those who live in communities where the levels of social cohesion envisaged in stereotypical representations of rural life no longer exist are also unlikely to have regular, informal support offered to them and in consequence may struggle to age in place. The findings from this paper thus highlight how important it is to understand the environmental milieu older adults live in, especially in a political context that supports the transfer of welfare state institutional activity to individuals and their communities.

The third paper is Gibb's contribution which considers remote areas within the Northern Territory, Australia. It examines the type of health and social care that is available and the experiences of both aboriginal and white groups in making use of these services. Gibb reports that a variety of factors inhibit successful and appropriate ageing in place, with the implementation of health and social care systems that are not fit for purpose being a particular concern. Her paper highlights the ways in which many solutions to delivering services required by an ageing population are designed with urban communities in mind (a point also made by Volckaert *et al.*) and she advocates adopting place-based approaches to co-produce models of service provision that are fit for purpose in remote rural areas and that will meet the needs of different groups within those communities. The paper highlights the ways in which local communities have attempted to fill in gaps that traditional models of service provision have failed to meet and thus provides examples that could be adopted by other communities facing similar challenges.

The final two Special Issue papers report findings from research that was conducted in England. Gearey and Gilchrist's paper explores the civic roles played by older people and the ways in which they contribute to supporting rural governance structures and processes. Previous work (*c.f.* Davies, Lockstone-Binney and Holmes, 2018; Munoz, Farmer, Warburton and Hall, 2014) has highlighted the contribution that older people make by volunteering in rural communities and this paper adds to these debates by highlighting that older people are often critical to the successful governance of rural communities. Gearey and Gilchrist suggest pivotal engagements by older residents can be understood as performances of resilience and as being illustrative of a rural gerontocracy becoming a prominent feature in contemporary rural society. The paper clearly positions older people as important assets to and within rural communities, in stark contrast to frequently voiced standpoints that position (rural) demographic ageing as a problem society needs to address.

In the final contribution to the Special Issue, Smith, Phillips, Brooking, Duer and Kinton build on their existing influential work on rural gentrification to argue that ageing is and should be of concern within studies of rural gentrification. They suggest that research to date which has gentrification associated with early to mid-phases of the life course should now be complimented with studies that explicitly acknowledge older adults. Smith *et al.* argue that, by widening the lens on gentrifier populations in rural areas, more can be learnt about processes and issues associated with rural gentrification. For example, what are the experiences of those who have aged in place while gentrification has happened 'around them'? Has the quality of life of these who remain been compromised by young people brought up in the area being priced out of the local housing market, displaced by gentrification? What is the long term impact on rural demographic profiles and housing markets as successive 'waves' of gentrification flow through rural places?

The five papers that comprise this Special Issue all speak to themes that illustrate the diverse geographies of rural ageing. They showcase work undertaken by researchers that is developing the emerging field of *geographical gerontology*. They also serve as a reminder that understanding diverse lived experiences and appreciating how different spatial contexts create and reproduce ways in which ageing in rural areas unfolds for individuals and communities will become increasingly important as demographic ageing becomes even more pronounced in nations across the world.

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