Ageing in the bush: The role of rural places in maintaining identity for long term rural residents and retirement migrants in north-east Victoria, Australia

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Identity
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A B S T R A C T

As a consequence of local population ageing, which is more pronounced in rural areas, the issue of maintaining a positive quality of life for rural older people is attracting significant attention. While environmental psychology theory has advocated the role of place identity in defining the self, there has been little applied research exploring how this occurs in later life. This exploratory, qualitative study (n = 16) utilises Breakwell's (1986, 1992) identity process theory to investigate how rural older Australians (retirement migrants and long-term residents) use place to sustain and build a sense of self at a time when many are susceptible to age-related loss. The paper draws on the concepts of distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy in order to explore how place identity is supported and maintained. Findings suggest that rural places are beneficial in terms of identity maintenance, with differences between long term and more recent rural residents. Furthermore, findings also highlight that place-related change or growth can potentially threaten older people's identification as a 'rural' person.

1. Introduction

While it is acknowledged that the world's population is ageing rapidly, the impact of this on rural areas is more pronounced than in urban areas. From a global perspective, the percentage of the population aged 60 and over is higher in rural areas, and this can be attributed to trends in rural/urban migration, with young adults relocating to urban areas while older people migrate to rural areas in retirement (Kinsella, 2001; United Nations, 2009). This out-movement of younger people leaves the remaining older people in rural communities as a greater proportion of the population, while retirement migration actively increases the percentage of the population that is aged (Hugo, 2005). Between 1971 and 1996, total growth in coastal non-metropolitan regions neared 1.1 million persons, and this was attributed in large part to retirement migration (Burnley and Murphy, 2004). Increased retirement migration rates in Australia are based on lifestyle considerations and previous holiday experience in the area, in addition to financial advantages (Costello, 2009). This trend has led to a diversity among rural communities, with tourism based, retirement migration locations increasing in population but ageing rapidly, while inland, farming areas simultaneously experience population decline and ageing (Hugo, 2005). Regardless of the trend, increased numbers of people will be ageing in Australian rural locations, and therefore the question of how to maintain a positive quality of life for ageing rural populations assumes great importance (Kinsella, 2001).

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the role of place in healthy ageing, with emerging interest in environmental psychology and gerontology (Andrews et al., 2007, 2009; Wahl and Weisman, 2003). Place assumes greater significance for people as they age due to increased reflection and reminiscence (Hay, 1998). Relationships with place can promote well-being, keep the past alive, offer constancy, meaning, control, and security in times of change, maintain a sense of competence and independence, facilitate adjustments and maintain positive self-image and identity (Peace et al., 2006; Rowles, 1983; Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992; Wiles et al., 2009). Thus, places provide a framework within which identity is constructed and transformed, and this gives rise to place identity, or the dimensions of self which define personal identity in relation to the physical environment (Cuba and Hummon, 1993b; Proshansky, 1978).

However, maintenance of a place-related identity assumes particular significance for older people residing in rural areas, as they face continued threats to relationships with place. First, age-related change in health and mobility can limit interaction with place (Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). It can also exacerbate issues associated with rurality (Cook et al., 2007; Scharf and Bartlam, 2008), such as geographical/social isolation (Davis and Bartlett, 2008; Heenan, 2006; Manthorpe et al., 2004), increased costs for goods and services (Wenger, 2001); poor transport and infrastructure.

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(Manthorpe et al., 2004); and issues gaining access to services (Scharf and Bartlam, 2008). Second, environmental change can have consequences which reduce interaction with place (Lawton and Nahemow, 1973). These changes may influence physical, mental and social well-being, affect community morale and social capital, diminish connectedness and information flow and promote social isolation (Berry, 2009; Sartore et al., 2008; Speller and Twigger-Ross, 2009).

For older people in particular, change may result in feelings of loss and placelessness (Cook et al., 2007). However, before the impact of these factors on place identity for rural older people can be understood, the mechanisms by which rural people interact with their places to maintain identity must be clarified. Differences between groups must also be explored, as research has proposed that retirement migrants and long term rural residents may relate to place in different ways (Burholt, 2006; Burholt and Naylor, 2005).

This paper draws on qualitative, phenomenological research conducted in two small rural communities in Victoria, southern Australia, to explore the manner in which relationships with place inform personal identity for rural older people, from the perspective of both retirement migrants and long term rural residents. The ageing context in Australia mirrors that of many other western countries, with 36% of Australians aged 65+ and older residing in rural locations (Davis and Bartlett, 2008; Howe, 2008), and this will pose challenges to local healthy ageing. A theoretical framework based on Breakwell’s identity process theory (1986, 1992) and refined for specific application to place (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996) is employed to explore how residing in a rural location contributes to the development and maintenance of place-related identity for older people, in terms of its role in maintaining distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy. These factors are then examined in terms of how they are influenced by sense of place dimensions such as place attachment, sense of community and place dependence. As an exploratory study, use of this framework lays the foundations for understanding the specific mechanisms by which different groups of older people develop and maintain a positive identity whilst living in a rural area.

2. Identity, sense of place dimensions and rural ideology

Place identity represents a cognitive relationship with location (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001), in terms of how it locates, regulates and maintains the self (Cuba and Hummon, 1993b; Korpela, 1989; Proshansky, 1978). It dictates what a place stands for and enables a person to identify themselves to others (Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989). It is the perception of being ‘at home’ (Cuba and Hummon, 1993a), where place is an extension of self (Pretty et al., 2003). In short, who you are is related to where you are and where you belong (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000), and this is achieved through a series of beliefs, feelings, values, and behaviours directed toward the environment (Proshansky, 1978). Lalli’s (1992) urban identity scale suggests that place identity can be operationalised by means of evaluation, continuity, attachment, familiarity and commitment, which in turn develop an individual’s self-concept. The self is regulated through control of a place, naming it, humanising it and having memories of it, which in turn promotes self-esteem and a sense of coherence (Korpela, 1989).

Literature stemming from environmental psychology indicates that place identity is influenced by concepts such as place dependence, sense of community (SOC) and place attachment (Cuba and Hummon, 1993b; Hernandez et al., 2007; Lalli, 1992; Peace et al., 2006; Pretty et al., 2003; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Sense of community is a shared meaning of place, indicative of provision and receipt of community resources and identification with the community (Pretty et al., 2003; Shamai, 1991), while place dependence represents the strength of association between individuals and places, based on a subjective, comparative assessment (Hummon, 1992; Pretty et al., 2003; Stokols and Shumaker, 1981). Place attachment is indicative of emotional relationships with place (Bonnes and Secchiarioli, 1995; Low and Altman, 1992; Tuan, 1974), where a place has acquired meaning and uniqueness (Shamai, 1991). While research has suggested that place attachment should be used as an overarching concept (Kyle et al., 2003, 2004; Raymond et al., 2010; Stedman, 2002, 2003, 2006; Williams and Vaske, 2003), research has determined that place attachment develops before place identity, particularly in the case of in-migrants, and is influenced by time of residence (Hernandez et al., 2007). As Korpela (1989) suggests, place attachment provides the main basis for place identity through regulating the pleasure/pain balance, and self-esteem.

While place attachment is important to older people, and plays a significant role in fostering place identity (Rowles, 1983) processes associated with ageing, such as retirement and reduced social roles, can challenge existing identity processes (Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). Thus, place identity may assume greater importance, and attachment should be considered in terms of how it facilitates this. While the majority of literature relating to older people and place focuses primarily on place attachment, ways in which places facilitate identity for older people have been identified. As Peake and colleagues (2005) suggest, quality of life is obtained when individuals feel secure about their identity. Older people with ties to places are more likely to have a positive self-concept, and these ties are influenced by critical evaluations of place (Golant, 2003). Memories of place play a significant role in maintaining self image (Burholt and Naylor, 2005; Taylor, 2001), with autobiographical insideness providing the basis of identity in old age, as it provides continuity and preserves belonging (Rowles, 1983). Similarly, for retirement migrants, memories of previous experience in the locale play a role in fostering place identity (Cuba and Hummon, 1993b). Social affiliations are also significant, as a positive image of self is fostered by strong family and community ties (Taylor, 2001). These relationships with place supplement identity for older people through strengthening the self, retaining a positive self image and maintaining a sense of competence (Rowles, 1983; Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). Recent work completed in the English context has suggested that the material and social elements of places which are salient provide a basis for creating and maintaining identity, inclusive of belonging, crime and fear, neighbourhood and sense of community, and community involvement (Peace et al., 2006).

Thus, the development of a place related identity for older people is related to both physical and social environments. However, while studies on place identity suggest that it is primarily influenced by physical environments (Korpela, 1989), this does not consider the social connotations of place. Dixon and Durrheim (2000) have noted that as well as being individualistic, place identity is also collective, which allows individuals to make sense of their connectedness to place through social constructions of that place. Thus, in lieu of the importance of both physical and social relationships with place, to examine place identity researchers have utilised a theoretical framework that reflects the development of personal identity. Rather than having a separate place identity, it is assumed that all aspects of identity have place related implications (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). However, as researchers have noted, there is limited information on how identity is constructed through specific processes, or the manner in which places become significant to the self-concept (Korpela, 1989; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). To address this shortfall, studies have utilised Breakwell’s (1986, 1992) identity process theory to examine the influence of place, or facets of place, on personal identity (Knez, 2005; Speller and Twigger-Ross, 2009; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Within this framework, identity processes of assimilation, accommodation and evaluation work to produce personal distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, and...
studies have determined that attached people discuss place in ways that positively reflected these principles, while nonattached people evaluated their environments in a neutral or unattached manner (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Research examining the application of these principles to an altered rural environment suggested that changes to environments altered these identity principles, particularly in regard to distinctiveness, and resulted in reduced social and cultural connectedness and promoted isolation (Speller and Twigger-Ross, 2009). Peace and colleagues (2006) have drawn on this framework to examine housing for older people, and conclude that individuals have a better self-concept when these identity principles are maintained.

Importantly, use of identity process theory within this research also provides a theoretical lens to examine how rural cultural ideologies (based on both physical and social characteristics) are incorporated into the self concept by older people, and the specific mechanisms by which this occurs. The literature suggests that rurality as a social construction plays a role in framing identity, in that it offers people a set of beliefs that can underpin their everyday lives, and a means to understand their world (Gray and Phillips, 2001). Aitkin (1985) refers to this rural affiliation as ‘countrymindedness’, a set of ideas shared by rural dwellers in relation to the differences between urban and rural settings, both culturally and structurally. Research has determined that factors associated with ‘countrymindedness’, such as the perceived superiority of rural areas in terms of lifestyle, amenity and community, allow residents to experience place attachment and a sense of home (Duffy, 2007). A major component of rural ideology is the significance of community, both as a resource and as a source of rural differentiation, and the existence of a hierarchy based on wealth, occupation and community longevity (Gray and Phillips, 2001).

Thus, dominant rural ideologies may be exclusionary to both older people and to those who are new to the community (Gray and Phillips, 2001), such as retirement migrants, and consequently the manner in which they incorporate rural ideology into their identities must be explored. Certainly, the literature has paid little attention to the processes informing the construction of place-related identity for rural retirement migrants. This is problematic, considering that environmental and social characteristics of place strongly influence retirement migration decisions for older rural Australians (Burnley, 1988). Given that retirement migrants are more likely to be attached to aesthetic and functional qualities of place compared to an emphasis on historical attachment and social integration for long term rural residents (Burbolt, 2006; Burbolt and Naylor, 2005), it is expected that they will also construct their place-related identities in a different manner. Gibson and Argent (2008) have noted in their examination of rural youth out-migration that young people often feel that they do not belong in rural places, and do not identify with them in any way. Therefore, it is questioned whether rural retirement migration can be attributed to a lack of fit between an older person’s identity principles and urban living.

Significantly, use of identity process theory in a qualitative manner in the community context will also allow the processes which link place and identity for older people to be explored in significant detail, without using the traditional concept of place attachment as a conceptual lens, as has been the case in many seminal studies looking at older people (i.e. Rowles, 1983). While the role of place attachment in fostering identity has already been acknowledged, it is suggested that this will be independently reflected in discussion of these identity principles. Further, while this review has touched on the ways that the relationship between self and place is conceptualised in relation to older people, the specific processes which facilitate this have not been examined in detail. Lacking, in particular, is knowledge about how specific kinds of places (i.e. rural) can influence identity principles, and the impact of other place dimensions on place identity for older people. Knowledge regarding the influence of specific processes on place identity for different groups of older people (retirement migrants and those ageing in place) is integral in addressing threats to positive ageing in later life.

3. Aim and objectives

By means of a phenomenological, qualitative approach, this study explores how rurality contributes to the development and maintenance of distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy for older people residing in rural Australian communities. In doing so, the study also sought to determine the influence of the various place dimensions (place attachment, SOC and place dependence) in supporting identity principles, and to explore potential differences between retirement migrants and long term rural residents in terms of developing and maintaining a place identity.

4. Materials and methods

The participants for this study were recruited from two small rural communities located in the Hume region, north-east Victoria, Australia (Fig. 1). This region is located on the border of the states of Victoria and New South Wales, approximately 3 h from Melbourne and 5 h from Sydney. Located on the Murray River, the region is known for its attractive scenery and appeal to retirement migrants, often called tree changers (Costello, 2007).

The selection of these two case study communities was based on their demographic similarities. Both communities have populations of less than 10,000 people, with a large percentage of the population aged over 65 years (nearly 30% in each), and are ageing rapidly as a result of continued ageing in place and increased levels of retirement migration. These increased rates of retirement migration are fuelled by close proximity to the Murray River and the Victorian snowfields, and to larger regional centres. Both communities are less than an hour by car from Albury/Wodonga, the closest regional centre, which has a population of approximately 100,000. As a result of their proximity to the water, both communities are popular tourism destinations, but also possess a strong industrial and agricultural focus (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2011). Both communities possess their own distinct health services, aged care facilities, churches, police and rural ambulance services, supermarkets, pharmacies and banks and a limited number of specialty stores. In terms of clubs and organizations, both communities also maintain prominent golf, football and bowls clubs, as well as a number of groups which cater primarily for older people (e.g. Red Cross, Senior Citizens, service clubs).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee (FHEC9/150). Participants were recruited through community contacts and snowball sampling within the regions, and all were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 16 retired individuals aged between 64 and 98 years (average age 73.1 years) residing in a community setting. Table 1 provides a basic demographic profile of the participants. The interviews addressed the following core questions: 1) Have you lived here a long time/how did you come to live here? 2) What it is like to live here? and 3) How does living here make you feel? These questions supported the phenomenological approach, allowing the researchers to capture the lived experience of place, in terms of how it is perceived, described, felt, judged, remembered and made sense of (Patton, 2002). Issues or themes raised by the participants in the interview were then expanded upon where appropriate in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of place to these
participants. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then entered into a qualitative data analysis program (NVivo).

The data were analysed in a two-step process (Patton, 2002). Initially, the data were analysed using an interpretive approach to identify emergent themes. These themes categorised the data according to key topics, including the importance of community support, issues of transport, and the advantages of rural locations over urban ones. A second and higher order analysis was then conducted through a deductive approach utilising Breakwell’s identity process theory (1986, 1992) as a theoretical lens. In accord with prior research utilising this framework (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996), the concepts have been somewhat amended in order to include two dimensions of specificity. Specifically, therefore, the data were analysed in terms of place enabled distinctiveness, continuity (both place referent and place congruent), self-esteem and self-efficacy for participants in this study.

In summary, key concepts can be defined as follows. Distinctiveness was demonstrated by the use of a place identification to define difference between self and others. Place referent continuity was reflected by discussion centred on the role of place in relating past activities and selves to the present, and place-congruent continuity was confirmed by discussions relating to perceived fit between person and environment. Self-esteem was verified by the role of place in providing a positive perception of self, and self-efficacy was confirmed by the ability of place to facilitate ease in daily living, in regard to facilities and functional aspects of place (Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). From this higher order thematic analysis, aspects of place dependence, SOC and place attachment were then identified within these data. Sense of community was indicated by shared meanings of place (Pretty et al., 2003), place dependence by means of a subjective assessment of place (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981), and place attachment by an emotional bond with place (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006).

Strategies were put in place to ensure that rigour was achieved throughout the research process (Guba and Lincoln, 1982; Sandelowski, 1986). This included the attainment of truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). Interviews were conducted with diverse groups of participants (retirement migrants and those long term rural residents), to broaden representation in the data. Utilisation of a semi-structured interview tool allowed for consistency to be achieved in interview data for analysis purposes while still achieving a meaningful and accurate representation of participant views (Minichiello et al., 1995). Efforts have been made to represent the viewpoints raised by all participants, with both confirmatory and opposing views included in the reporting of the data. As Sandelowski (1986, p. 30) suggests, qualitative studies are credible when they present ‘such faithful descriptions or interpretations of a human experience that the people having that experience would immediately recognise it from those descriptions or interpretations as their own’. To limit distortion, direct quotes have been utilised to represent key themes in the data. Finally, thematic analysis utilising NVivo and a pre-existing theoretical framework has ensured a consistent process, and established a ‘decision trail’ in terms of coding and analysis (Guba and Lincoln, 1982).

5. Results and discussion

In consideration of Cuba and Hummon’s (1993a) definition of place identity as being ‘at home’ in a place, all but one participant in the present study indicated that they felt at home in their rural locations, or that they identified with their places of residence. This sense of feeling ‘at home’ was created through the role of their rural location in establishing personal distinctiveness, place referent continuity, place congruent continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Conversely, for the one participant who did not feel at home, his rural place of residence was unable to facilitate certain identity processes, as illustrated in the discussion that follows.

5.1. Distinctiveness

Distinctiveness was a key theme in the data, with all participants expressing ways in which their community was distinct, and
how they identified with their local place. As Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) have also determined, this occurred in four alternate ways: settlement identification (identifying as being from the country not the city), regional identifications (coming from a specific region); local identifications (part of a local community), and personal distinctiveness (a long history of involvement). Overall findings are presented in Table 2, which suggests that local place identifications were strongest among the participants (all 16 participants responded with a local identification) as opposed to only a few identifying as being from the state or broader region (3 comments). Table 2 also provides some illustrations of comments that support these dimensions.

It is interesting to note here that many participants identified as being rural or country people, and compared this with city living. Most comments focused on differences in the social and physical environments, with participants highlighting the friendliness and personal interactions of rural people, as well as the natural environment and open spaces. Further, whilst all participants expressed a form of local affiliation, the manner in which this was constructed differed between groups. Those who had lived in the town or region for a long time highlighted their length of residence, and maintained personal distinctiveness based on this. However, those who had moved to a rural area were more likely to make the point that they still identified as locals and felt they belonged, even though they felt that others may not see them that way. Participants attributed a specific local attachment to group affiliations, recognition within and acceptance by the community. Being a local was defined in terms of group membership or roles, such as being on a local committee, and this involvement enabled them to be recognised as a local and not a visitor. These findings suggest that achieving distinctiveness in terms of being from a rural area or from that specific place was important to participants.

5.2. Place congruent continuity

Place congruent continuity, or the perceived fit between a person and their environment, was confirmed by all but one participant. As shown in Table 3, in discussing place congruence, participants listed qualities that were important to them and which enabled place satisfaction. These included a range of physical and social features, such as peace and quiet, the scenery, community spirit and the climate.

There were some differences between those who had lived in the region all their life and those who had moved there more recently. The former group suggested that the physical and social environment were part of their rural upbringing. As one participant suggested, open space was important, as it was how he had always lived. For retirement migrants, however, congruence was discussed in terms of how well it met their expectations for retirement, particularly in terms of amenities. Some had moved from cities as they felt that life there was incongruent with their values, and they felt more in tune with rural life. Others suggested that their desire for rural living was based on childhood holidays in rural areas. Congruence was demonstrated in many cases by comparison with other locations, particularly life in a city. Interestingly, the one participant who did not exhibit place congruence felt that the local community did not respect his need for privacy, which he had experienced in his previous life on the farm.

5.3. Place referent continuity

Nearly all participants (14/16) demonstrated forms of place referent continuity, where characteristics of place acted as a reference for the past. This was expressed in two forms: historical continuity and social continuity. Most participants (14/16) expressed a form of historical continuity. This was particularly important for those who were long term residents, and could identify physical features and

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**Table 2**

Achievement of distinctiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement identification (10)</th>
<th>'I'm a country person now, yes' (Betty)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I was never a Melbourne person' (Bob)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I've always had an association with the country' (Joan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Even though I was born and I've grown up and had our kids in the city, I've never really thought it was where I should be' (Val)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Holiday period, 90% of the people don't speak because they're from the city' (William)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State and regional identifications (3)</td>
<td>'I'm basically a north-east person' (Robert)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I wouldn't want to live over the other side. I still want to live in Victoria, I might be funny there.' (William)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place and local identifications (16)</td>
<td>'If we ring someone in Melbourne we might say it's Yarrawonga calling' (George)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I feel like one of them' (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I can be relaxed. I don't feel as though I've got to make myself or prove myself or anything like that' (Peggy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'John Smith's been here for how many years, 25 or 30 or something like that but he's only a blow in' (Al)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Well they say you're never a local until you're (here for) 25 years' (Joan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal distinctiveness (4)</td>
<td>'From the old town... born at the old hospital' (Al)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I emerged from the horse and buggy days' (Clarrie)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 3**

Place congruent continuity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General qualities valued</th>
<th>Comparison with other places</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living in a rural area (8)</td>
<td>'Couldn't live in the city, no way' (Al)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Where I would most certainly not like to be living is in Melbourne' (Bob)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community spirit (11)</td>
<td>'You couldn't talk to anyone in Melbourne' (Donald)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety (7)</td>
<td>'I feel better here than if I lived in Melbourne... old ladies get attacked and all sorts of things now' (Betty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Albury/Wodonga would be closer... but it's not safe' (Clarrie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability and quality of amenities (services/activities) (11)</td>
<td>'I mean there's towns that haven't got a hospital' (Peggy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'There's always something to do. It's just like wherever you live, it's really not that much different' (Betty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature and scenery (12)</td>
<td>'I like the hill country. I didn't like working in Shepparton much because it's flat' (Robert)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I could just have easily lived in Beechworth or Mt Beauty' (Bob)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quieter, easygoing place (13)</td>
<td>'It's not a rat race like it was down in Melbourne' (William)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean air (6)</td>
<td>'You haven't got the health problems and the smog and all that Melbourne's got' (Donald)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate (8)</td>
<td>'I just think our weather is better' (Donald)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open spaces (6)</td>
<td>'All you'd see was tin roofs, garages, houses, fences. Didn't want any more of that' (Val)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'We've still sort of boxed in like you were in Melbourne. Yeah it's open out the back.' (Ken)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy (1)</td>
<td>'I'd sooner be out there... there's no privacy for a start' (Clarrie)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
places associated with their lives. This was a key feature of their sense of belonging. Most of the retirement migrants, on the other hand, also achieved some form of continuity through holiday experiences in the area. Place referent continuity was also achieved by social means, and this was expressed in terms of having family connections in the area, and long-term friends. This was primarily the case for long term residents, who stated that this continuity was a large part of what kept them in that place. It was less true of the retirement migrants, as to be expected, with two participants not expressing any form of place referent continuity. However, one participant noted that he had moved to the area because of the social bonds he had there with friends. Further, retirement migrants discussed their place in regard to what Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) have referred to as ‘historical continuity’, where moving to a rural place was seen to symbolise a new period of their lives in terms of retirement (see Table 4). Finally, and despite place referent continuity, participants were also able to identify a number of threats that challenged their enjoyment of place, specifically relating to change over time.

5.4. Self-esteem

All but two participants referred to the manner in which their places made them feel good about themselves, and this was observed across four primary areas: pride in place characteristics, positive perceptions of visitors and outsiders, improvements in place and community involvement and recognition (see Table 5). Most participants (12/16) expressed pride in place characteristics in terms of what they felt was distinctive about their location in relation to others, including other rural locations. Positive perceptions from outsiders made them feel proud to live in the area (7/16). Retirement migrants, in particular, referred with pride to the enjoyment their family and friends gained from visiting the area. Recent improvements in their location also generated feelings of pride. Evidence of self esteem was also commonly associated with pride in positive community involvement for most participants (12/16). This was expressed in terms of their ability to band together in times of need. Finally, while place made people feel good about themselves, participants were also able to identify some challenges to their perceptions of place, which threatened their positive place identity.

5.5. Self efficacy

Rural living was positively viewed in terms of self efficacy, or how life in a rural community enabled the daily functioning of participants. Table 6 presents these findings, and shows that ease of access (15/16) and safety (10/16), as well as positive dimensions of health (9/16) were all important to participants. There were also some threats to self-efficacy noted, such as increased problems in accessing facilities. Generally, participants suggested that living in a safe environment allowed them to get out into the community. This was attributed to knowing people locally as well as the lack of deviant behaviour in the area that they saw as synonymous with city life. However, a number of participants, particularly those residing in tourist destinations, suggested that their environments were becoming less safe, due to increased development and changes in population.

Nearly all participants (15/16) noted that their rural area was beneficial in terms of ease of access to amenities, services and other places, which was again compared positively with other rural communities and major cities. Retirement migrants, in particular, noted that, for these reasons, they were more involved in activities than they had been in cities. Community assistance was also noted as important in facilitating increased self efficacy, through providing help and support when needed. Living in a rural place was also seen to facilitate better health and well-being, which was important, as many of the retirement migrants reluctantly noted that they might need to return to the city if they experienced poor health in order to be close to medical services and family.

Table 4
Place referent continuity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Continuity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical continuity</td>
<td>'We came for holidays every year here, um, and stayed in a cabin, and went fishing and, you know, looking around the area' (Molly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social continuity</td>
<td>'I think it’s just that I know the place. That I’ve always known it since I was about, oh, I suppose I would have been 14 I suppose since I first come here' (Joan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges to place referent continuity</td>
<td>'I looked up at the ceiling and remembered putting it up! So I don’t know how you can substitute that sort of thing, if you come to an area and you’re just new there and no roots and nothing to look back at what you’ve done, well I don’t know how you ever feel part of that community.' (Al)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Self-esteem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Self-esteem</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pride in place characteristics</td>
<td>'Our show is still surviving where a lot of country shows have folded up' (Al)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive perceptions of outsiders</td>
<td>'I often think how lucky we are to have a beautiful walk… it gives you a good feeling' (Betty)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvements in place</td>
<td>'I get great pride in the high school, the reputation it’s got' (Al)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement and recognition</td>
<td>'It does make me feel good. To know that people enjoy coming here' (Joan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges to self-esteem</td>
<td>'Well they've sort of brightened the streets up a lot to what they used to be. They used to be drab and dreary. Just your old cement paving. Now they've put murals on there and they've bricked it a bit' (Joan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I think it makes you feel good that you have been able to be part of the building up process over a period of time' (Peggy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'They make you feel that if you do something, you've done something worthwhile' (Val)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I'm proud of the workforce that lays dormant and if something big came up exactly like that we can rise to the occasion' (Al)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'I'm in the RSL (but) it's floundering' (Clarrie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'It's not as good a place as it used to be. There are more bogan, if I can use the word, around here now' (George)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.6. Influence of other SOP processes on place-related identity

Exploring these findings utilising process identity theory (Breakwell, 1986, 1992; Tigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996) shows the importance of all five concepts associated with place identity — distinctiveness, place referent continuity, place congruent continuity, self esteem and self efficacy. The final section now considers how these findings are influenced by other sense of place dimensions, such as sense of community (SOC), place dependence, and place attachment. First, possession of a SOC, or shared meanings associated with place, was integral in the data to informing all five identity processes. As expected, this shared identification provided distinctiveness, both within the community through group involvement, and outside it by means of their rural, regional or local affiliation. However, it also enabled place congruence to occur. Place congruent continuity included a social component, where SOC was deemed as something that was valued within a place and confirmed the person/environment fit. SOC was also a factor in place referent continuity, particularly for long term rural residents, as their social connections with place through family and friends provided opportunities to relive the past. Belonging to a close knit community also provided self-esteem, through contributions made to the community and banding together with others, and provided a role identity that made older people feel valued. For some individuals, belonging to community also enabled them to draw on community resources to facilitate self-efficacy.

Second, place dependence, or subjective association of place, was linked in the findings to four of the five concepts in process identity theory, place congruent and place referent continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Findings suggest that it was linked with place congruent continuity in terms of aesthetic and other qualities that were valued, and place referent continuity in terms of the ability to relate to that place in a historical sense. In these instances, place quality and suitability was assessed through comparison with other urban or rural places, and the ability of that place to facilitate goal-oriented behaviours, or reflect personal values, resulted in pride and positive self-esteem. Further, the ability of place to enable goal-oriented behaviour was linked with self-efficacy, in terms of access to services and amenities, health and safety, and community assistance.

Finally, place attachment, the emotional bond with place, was primarily related to distinctiveness and place-referent continuity. All participants suggested that they felt at home because of friends and family they had in the community, the groups they were involved in and the ability to distinguish and be distinguished from others, which made them feel comfortable and relaxed within their environments. For both retirement migrants and those long term rural residents, this reflected their local identification, and suggested a fit within that environment in terms of what they valued. For those long term rural residents and those who had family or long-term friends in the area, there was also evidence of place referent continuity, which was achieved through attachment to places such as family homes, farms, or community spaces. However, a number of retirement migrants also expressed an attachment to place in terms of its congruence with their values, such as available amenities, freedom of lifestyle and the atmosphere of the place, as has been noted in previous studies (Burholt and Naylor, 2005). While these various emotional bonds to place promoted positive self-esteem, there was no evidence that they had any impact upon self-efficacy.

6. Conclusions

Data reported in this paper are from an exploratory study with a relatively small sample size, and clearly further research is needed to build on these findings. However, this is a critical time for such research, particularly due to demographic shifts, which are seeing larger numbers of older people across the world, and movements of this population into rural areas in the retirement phase of life (Costello, 2007; Davis and Bartlett, 2008). Findings based on theory, as in the present article, can contribute to building the knowledge base in this critical area of research.

In summary, use of identity process theory has provided a theoretical lens to examine how rural cultural ideologies are incorporated into the self concept by older people, and the specific mechanisms by which this occurs, which has yielded some additional contributions to the rural ageing literature. Findings from this study suggest that there are certain aspects of rurality which are significant to older people’s positive identity, and these are important at a time when their existing identities may be challenged as a result of age-related loss. Rural communities provide distinctiveness for their residents through small, closely knit communities which provide multiple role identities and personalised interactions. Continuity is achieved through the ability of rural places to cater for qualities that have proved salient to the self, such as clean air, nature and scenery, community spirit and amenity lifestyles, and the ability of rural places to act as referents for past selves and actions. Rural places foster self-esteem through provision of scenic locations which foster pride in the area, and through the community spirit. Self-esteem is also boosted by the ability of rural locations to facilitate self-efficacy. This is facilitated in rural areas through easier access to groups and activities, safer and healthier environments and supportive communities. Moreover, this research has also indicated that while place attachment plays an important role, concepts such as place dependence and sense of community are also important in fostering identity principles for rural older people.
Importantly, this research has also shed some light on how retirement migrants in particular identify with their rural places. While those who had previous experience in the area did identify with their locations based on this, as previous research has identified (Cuba and Hummon, 1993a), this was perhaps less significant than expected. Rather, their rural and local identifications were constructed largely through the personal values they felt made them a rural person, the ability of the place to facilitate these qualities and values, and through their involvement in groups and activities. Thus, despite being new to rural living, they exhibited a level of ‘countrymindedness’ (Atkin, 1985), and felt that they had incorporated the rural culture into their self-concept. These rural and local identifications allowed them to distinguish themselves from their previous life as ‘city’ people, which increased their self-esteem due to their better quality of life. While these identifications were also important for long term rural residents, the role of place-referent continuity, and self-esteem achieved through watching the place evolve and change over time, was particularly salient for this group.

This importance of the ‘rural’ in constructing identity for older people, both retirement migrants and long term rural residents, is significant in relation to potential change, and this research has identified a number of aspects which will potentially threaten the ability of rural areas to provide distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem and self efficacy for older people who reside in them. However, the differing manner by which those ageing in place and retirement migrants construct their rural, local identities may also shed some light on potential frictions between these groups. As Brown and colleagues (2008) have noted, longer-term rural residents in the American context perceive that while retirement migrants usually ‘fit into the community, they promote a changed community context which results in contention. Significantly, there is also a tendency to refer to retirement migrants as a generalised ‘other’. In the context of our findings, this is problematic, as retirement migrants consistently identified themselves as rural and/or ‘local’, despite not fitting the dominant ideology of what a local should represent, and these differing viewpoints may potentially cause community conflict and threaten social connectivity. Again, this poses issues in terms of the significant roles community and social capital play in rural culture, and may further threaten place identity for rural older people. Future research is needed to explore this, and also to examine the impact of change on identity for rural older people, and the impact of this in terms of health and wellbeing. Such information will greatly inform planning strategies on how rural places can better empower older residents and support and maintain their positive identity strategies.

References


