"Just Ask Me": Mechanisms for Being Together in Fragile Communities

Jillian Marchant, James Cook University, Australia

Abstract

Communities located in sparsely populated rural areas traditionally rely on prolific social involvement among members to inform decisions and initiate action. A challenge in some communities is that social interactions form strong social bonds between inhabitants that limit the full social participation of other individuals. Where there is a threat to community existence, previous research finds even greater restrictions in local social arrangements. This study informs on the social fabric of communities in rural areas of South Australia, at a time when many of these communities face social deterioration, disruption to local institutions and uncertain futures. Reports were gathered from small number of resident contributors allowing a consideration of the persistent consequences of social arrangements that are found in rural areas. A deep understanding of the social mechanisms in communities in rural areas allows an exploration of the difficulties that pervasively limit the generation of synergistic arrangements between local and distant populations. It also highlights the historical, existing and potential dependence located in social interactions as a means to perpetuate the survival of rural communities. Through the reports of local contributors, the barriers and enablers in social arrangements are identified and their opinions are offered about local and societal mechanisms anticipated to revitalise local development. From the contributions of inhabitants, conclusions are drawn to suggest enablers hoped to secure a prosperous social existence by cultivating being together in community.

"Just Ask Me": Mechanisms for Being Together in Fragile Communities

This paper explores the social fabric of contemporary rural communities. It does so through understanding the reported social experiences of adult residents that inhabit the rural areas of South Australia. Previous research that has sought to understand the social characteristics of rural communities located in Australia report that the sustained existence of smaller populations necessitates an increased number of social interactions among members (Agnitsch, Flora, & Ryan, 2006, p. 41; Stone & Hughes, 2001, p. 40). Consequently, for individuals that inhabit rural communities "being together" is more than a social pastime, it is essential to their continued survival. Exploring the reported social experiences of inhabitants identifies the ways in which a social basis for the synergism of individuals within communities may be enabled. Suggestions may be drawn from the statements of residents about the ways in which individuals may continue being together as developments for South Australian rural communities unfold.

South Australian Rural Communities

Understanding the social aspects of community life in the rural areas of South Australia is partially informed by understanding the demographics of the State. The population of South Australia is approximately 1.67 million, of whom 1.23 million individuals reside in or near the capital of Adelaide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). The large areas outside of Adelaide are populated by over 400 000 individuals living in communities that support the primary production of exports (Spoehr & Jain, 2012, p. 13). The rural communities of South Australia are thus characterised as being remote from the metropolitan area and consisting of lower population densities (Smailes, 2002, p. 81; Spoehr & Jain, 2012). Research on the social mechanisms of isolated and sparsely populated communities such as those found in South Australia propose that the decisions and actions to sustain community life in rural areas is reliant on a greater number of social interactions among members (Gray & Lawrence, 2001, p. 173). Previous research identifies that dense social interactions leads to social arrangements that afford community members stronger social bonds to one another in comparison to the social bonds found among their metropolitan counterparts (Onyx & Bullen, 2000, p. 38). It is proposed by researchers that the prioritisation of strong localised social bonds is a mechanism to assist individuals to overcome the challenges of day-to-day living (Stone, 2003, p. 14). Researchers suggest that communities that have strong social bonds among members do so at the expense of neglecting the development of social bridges with those who are consider outsiders (Agnitsch et al., 2006, p. 38). An identified challenge is that community benefits, such as novel solutions from social participation of individuals who are considered outsiders, may be restricted (Agnitsch et al., 2006, p. 38). Problematically, where there is a perceived threat to the future of the community, members emphasise a reliance on the social bonds that assist their day to day living, rather than look to outsiders to continue or enhance their future prospects (Besser, 2013, p. 121). Social connection therefore, is a significant part of continued being or existence and is integral to overcoming the threat of demise. Social arrangements that offer chances to survive day-to-day living are in contrast to other social mechanisms such as individual self-realisation or developing community prosperity. Individual self-realisation or community prosperity rest on survival needs being taken care of and a notion that provisions will fuel developmental aspirations. Within the

State of South Australia, many individuals and their communities face significant threats to their survival rather than an abundance of resources for progress.

Contemporary Influences in Rural Communities

Uncertain community futures lends themselves to the work undertaken here, namely to inform about the ways in which beneficial social experiences are generated. Changes in human interconnection locally and across the globe has drastically influenced the future prospects of rural communities. Current research suggests that many rural communities now face additional pressures from contemporary influences such as the concurrent rise of globalisation and neoliberalism (Hogan & Young, 2013, p. 320; Hoggart & Paniagua, 2001, p. 48). Neoliberalism, as a method for international transactions, has led to domestic policies that use the same ideology to distribute resources and services. A consequence of this shift is that smaller isolated populations are now allocated less means rather than being compensated for the remote aspects of their existence. This has led to social deterioration and disruption in rural institutions, as individuals have out-migrated to better-resourced metropolitan areas. A further consequence of these changes is that many rural communities are without the institutions to cope with rapid and complex changes associated with global trends and now find themselves in crisis. Whilst not every rural community has experienced, or is in crisis, the overwhelming evidence reveals growing disparities between regions and amongst individuals, a situation that has prompted policymakers to respond with agendas such as the South Australian social inclusion initiative (McLachlan, Gilfillan, & Gordon, 2013, p. 47). The South Australian social inclusion initiative, and nationwide Social Inclusion Agendas are anticipated by policymaker to curb growing social inequities, both among individuals and between regions (Newman, Biedrzycki, Patterson, & Baum, 2007, p. 44). Social inclusion policies often rely on the participation of individuals to curb disparity through increasing their social participation, such as engaging with employment or education activities. It is of interest therefore, to investigate the social experiences of those who participate in either employment and/or education. Such an examination is in order to appreciate the influence of policy on the social experiences of individuals. At this time, the National Social Inclusion in Australia is no longer a priority of the Australian Government, however, social inclusion remains a priority of the South Australian Government as a specific responsibility of the Department for Communities. In particular, social inclusion has a key role in supporting the independence and participation of individuals and communities. Presumably, it follows that in the policy prescription advocating independent participation for any community within South Australia, opportunities now exist to include the contribution of more individual residents as community representatives. This representation is particularly salient in the decision-making processes that influences the future of rural communities by offer opportunities for individuals from these communities to power the decisions that affect them the most. It is proposed here that social experiences including the participation of individuals within communities, or as representatives of their community, is best understood by appreciating the reports of individuals that inhabit these areas.

Research Approach

It is anticipated that understanding the experiences of residents through their reports will illuminate the ways in which social experiences in rural communities are either restricted or enabled. This research seeks to gather and report these experiences, not to find a singular truth, but rather offers an approximation that may be reflected upon in anticipation of assisting an appreciation of the social aspects in these regions. This particular research circumstance therefore, lends itself to a qualitative approach to understand the social arrangements that currently existence within these communities through the reports of local individuals. In particular, a case study approach using local knowledge cases may expose the rich knowledge of contributors within their particular social setting and community circumstances. Consequently, this research aims to find common themes related to social opportunities to be together in their communities.

As stated earlier, traditional social arrangements to ensure survival, aspects of globalisation, as well as social inclusion agendas are some of the key influences in the generation of contemporary social mechanisms in rural communities. With reports of isolated and sparsely populated areas grappling with challenges in South Australia (Smailes, 2002, p. 93), it is especially pressing to investigate contemporary social arrangements. Understanding the possibilities for revitalised social arrangements ensures the survival of inhabitants and their communities as a keystone of community sustainability. Clearly, many research questions may be explored in relation to the social fabric of rural communities. However, this present research is a beginning to understand social relationships in present times. Therefore, the primary lines of enquiry are engaged with here; principally, how are social experiences generated in rural communities? And how is the generation of these social experiences either enabled or restricted? The methods used to understand these questions include a case study approach to gather the reports of individuals that inhabit some of the rural communities of South Australia.

Methods

Reports were gathered from small number of resident contributors, allowing a consideration of the persistent consequences of social arrangements that are found in rural areas. This work forms part of a larger study that engaged with adult students residing in rural areas. The larger study seeks to understand the mechanisms of social inclusion through the reports of adult students as individuals who are engaged with a participation strategy, namely education endeavours strongly advocated in social inclusion policy as having positive social impacts. This study uses semi-structured interviews to gather the reports of social experiences. Questions asked during an approximately 60-minute interview included "tell me about the social activities that you like to be involved in" ,"can you talk to me about the best way to get involved with the community" and "can you tell me how you feel about living here". Fourteen residents in 12 different rural areas across the State of South Australia have contributed to the study so far. All of the contributors are adult students that are enrolled or have recently completed adult education with a variety of courses ranging from a Certificate III to a PhD. The student's ages range from 28 to 71. In this study, the gender distribution is overwhelmingly skewed towards women, as only two of the contributors are men. However, this is not unsurprising as research in adult

education finds that women are more likely than men to engage with education and this trend is apparent in both metropolitan and rural contexts (Williamson, 2000, pp. 63, 60). For each instance of report, the contributor has approved a finalised transcript that may be used in this study. After approval the transcripts have been coded using NVivo. This coding centred on an inductive approach to understand the generation of social experiences for individuals and how these experiences are either enabled or restricted. This method, to gather a deep understanding of the social mechanisms in communities in rural areas, allows an exploration of the complexity that pervasively enhances or limits the generation of synergistic arrangements between local and distant populations.

Analysis of Social Experiences

When considering how social experiences are generated in rural communities contributors reported that a social experience or social activities that created "being together" in a community was likely to be prompted by friends. Friends are identified as more than casual acquaintances and often were from families known to each other across generations. As an example when asked about her friendships, Lisa said "[it's] "limited, limited, it's just due to my personal experiences and stuff like that. I just think it's very limited. It's more family friends". Contributors such as Wynne illuminated this position, as she was reluctant to be involved in social activities in her community and only joined after a "conversation with a friend over a long period". Friendships therefore, are an important enabler for the generation of social experiences within community.

Family and early education was also identified as an important mechanism for social experiences, as many contributors became involved in local activities through their children's activities. The involvement of children in kindergarten and school meant that parents are often required to attend meetings. As Oigle said "anybody left standing at the end of the meeting usually gets dobbed on to the council or the parents or friends or something else". When asked about how her friendships developed, Katrina said "through children. Through children mainly, yes. Playgroup, occasional care, went on to kindy, school, sporting". This involvement often permeates into other community experiences and the opportunity to meet new people. Amber expanded on this to identify the places to find social activities and the possibilities for social involvement. Amber said "they say sport, or the church, or the pub are the three things that make country communities tick, and they would be a good place to start, if you want to meet people. Find some way of getting involved and meeting people - volunteer for something. People appreciate that". However, many contributors found that volunteering might be difficult without an invitation to join in the social activity through friends. Emily's report demonstrated this when she volunteered into a community group where she was considered an outsider. When asked about the group and her experience she expressed "they do need to learn to welcome people and not just the people that have been there years and years, they need to accept new blood. A lot of them are related and in it together, when you're new blood it's very hard". This demonstrates that some groups in rural communities retain intense bonding capital that potentially excludes others from social experiences. In some social occasions that occur without the connection of friendships, it may therefore be difficult to have a sense of belonging through social activities. In summary friends, and especially friends made through connecting with the activities

of children enable individuals to connect into the plethora of social activities in rural communities that includes sport and volunteer groups.

Apart from a reliance on friendships to generate experiences, contributors were able to identify scenarios in which their social experiences and their friendships in their local communities are restricted. Overwhelmingly the reports cited a combination of caring duties and work or travelling to work as priorities. Emily expressed it well, "I am not involved in any activities, I haven't got time. Like, with my work, my work's shift work… I just couldn't fit it in, into my routine, it was just too hard, and then with studying as well, I study part time as well, I just couldn't fit it all in". It should be noted that due to their engagement with adult learning, many of the contributors may be in the same position, facing additional time restrictions that influences social availability. Sandy also indicated that time was a factor in joining into more community activities, "Not at the moment, no. I haven't found one yet. Been too busy with work… Normally, well put it this way in 5 months, I had done nearly 6000 kilometres. That wasn't including travel for work that had a petrol allowance, so 7-8000 in 5 months". Katrina also had heavy weekly travel commitments to fulfil her education and employment obligations "it's about 90 – 100 Ks it would be about 150 Ks or another regional centre nearly 300, I believe". Work commitments and travel to other regional centres to fulfil those commitments leave little time for contributors to be involved in social activities or to make personal connections. Sometimes a lack of time generates a lack of friends and this in turn generates a lack of social invitations that were not missed due to a lack of time. Emily's report highlighted the social difficulties that arise due to other commitments, she stated "I perhaps have one good friend, and my neighbour is really friendly, but we don't have the time to get together for coffee or anything like that. I have friends at work, but we don't go out or anything like that…. I think that everyone is in a similar situation, even mums with little kids don't have the time to make friends". This report suggests that even though the attendance of children at school could be previously relied upon for generating social connections in rural communities, this may be eroded by employment and travel pressures. A lack of friendship and social connections may mean that the social benefits from the interaction of residents is missing in rural communities. This may partially explain a reported lack of volunteers, and a lack of representative individuals, located in either community or outside institutions. When discussing the possibility of finding work in their town so that they could connect with friends and community rather than travelling, Heidi stated, "I think the services are just shutting down more and more. I think that here is just going to end up turning into an aged care facility and I think I'm surprised how many people, particularly women drive every day to work". Overall, increasing social participation activities such as education and employment activities are reported as restricting other social experiences for residents in rural communities. In turn, this restriction in engagement amongst individuals in rural communities has constrained traditional social avenues, such as parental attendance at school functions that allowed individuals to start on a journey to "be together".

Analysis of Social Involvement

In addition to being involved in various community activities in a manner that is facilitated by friendships, contributors expressed expectations about outcomes from being socially involved in community activities. These expectations are an important

component of the social experiences of rural inhabitants. Whilst none of the contributors demanded that there be a consistent outcome from their social involvement with others, many expected a positive outcome for their community would be evident from their social contribution. As Emily said about volunteering "the teamwork and satisfaction it all comes later. It's a long process". This encouraging expectancy is held in similar esteem by members across the state of South Australia as they express a deep understanding of the challenges that face their communities gathered through their social involvement. As Lisa found "and I even hear that the library is dying down, so it's well what's going to happen to the whole, what's going to happened to it in the future. Is there going to be a future…?" As individuals continue to engage with their community through social activities, their reflections on the state of the community highlights disturbing concerns.

Regardless of the amount or depth of their social activity, all of the contributors showed a significant interest in the future development of their communities. Anne expressed this "Because I care about our community, I guess and I care about where it's going… I guess it's just a passion, if people don't put their hands up to be involved in things, well maybe they won't happen". Despite their local knowledge and readiness to engage with collaborative efforts, the majority in this study did not expect to be asked about the decisions that affected them, or their communities, and felt that their suggestions were considered "a waste of time" by decision-makers. Lisa reflected on her community and the decisions that are made "but yes everywhere in this area would be our community, because everyone is affected by decisions. And even the council should consider everyone's decisions in every area here. It effects… like other states making decisions affects South Australia. It is sort of saying that someone saying they will do something that will affect and we will not talk about". A few experienced varying degrees of frustration that they are not asked about decisions that affected them and the wellbeing of their communities or that being consulted made little difference. Meg expressed "and they listen, but nothing happens, because it all comes down to dollar values and we're a number and that's all we are. They can say "yes, yes we understand your concern. Yes, yes, we can see what you are saying and we can understand where you are coming from". Meg's comments reflect the frustration about the local outcomes from neoliberal processes and the insignificance of local challenges to these practices.

Problematically for social inclusion initiatives, many contributors also reported that their community representatives are not consulted about the decisions that affect their communities – negating social inclusion policy statements that communities are independent and that participation is encouraged. Julie stated "I think we need to have a proper and educated public voice, and if we don't that have that within the community, I just don't think there's any direction from the community. We might as well go back to the dictatorship with a lot of small communities". Taken together this evidence suggests that social involvement in terms of decisions by individuals and rural communities about their futures is not perceived as widely consultative and may rely on other outside views.

This scenario of disillusioned residents who state there is a lack of consultation fits with European research that has found that residents are often only engaged with participation in community decisions through an extreme personal motivation {Shortall, 2008 #521@452}. Often the views of those participating in decisions are

in contrast to the majority, including the contributors to this study who expect better consultative mechanisms to offer them a chance to express their views. This is further evidenced by the contributors, who when prompted were able to concisely articulate the needs of themselves and their communities: proposing possible starting points for regeneration along with a willingness to be queried about potential developments. Taken as a whole these findings highlight the historical, existing and prospective dependence placed on good social connections and the need for exemplary societal mechanisms that influence decisions between local and distant populations to perpetuate the survival and development of rural communities.

Discussion

The contributions of inhabitants of the rural areas of South Australia have identified the ways in which their social experiences are generated and influenced by internal and external processes. Through the reports of rural residents, both the enabling offered by friendships and the social restrictions due to efforts in other social participation activities such as education and employment are revealed. These contributors have indicated that social mechanisms within their communities are diluted and fragile. Furthermore, the societal mechanisms that allow them to make decisions about their futures are also problematic. The contemporary social arrangements reported by contributors suggest that further research is required to discover paths that offer resources for localised social involvement and renewed consultative arrangements in distant relationships. Further work may include exploring both vulnerable and thriving communities respectively in terms of gathering reports on the social fragility or robustness of social relationships and decision-making structures. This would be a beginning in revitalising the synergy of additional and diverse individuals in rural community life. As one contributor stated when questioned about the best way to understand her ideas on the developments needed for social continuance in her community she replied, "Just Ask Me". I suggest that research seeking to understand the structures and resources that may facilitate more synergistic arrangements between local and distant populations begin by a revitalised questioning of those whom it affects: this would be in contrast to community direction waiting to be informed. Discovering the mechanisms for re-establishing "being together" in this way may offer a foundation for individuals in revitalised rural areas so that they can continue "doing together".

References

Agnitsch, K., Flora, J., & Ryan, V. (2006). Bonding and Bridging Social Capital: The Interactive Effects on Community Action. *Community Development, 37*(1), 36-51.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013). National Regional Profile: South Australia. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Besser, T. (2013). Resilient Small Rural Towns and Community Shocks. *Journal of Rural and Community Development, 8*(1), 117-134.

Gray, I., & Lawrence, G. (2001). *A Future for Regional Australia: Escaping Global Misfortune*. North Ryde, Australia: Cambridge University Press.

Hogan, A., & Young, M. (2013). Visioning a Future for Rural and Regional Australia. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 6*(2), 319-330.

Hoggart, K., & Paniagua, A. (2001). What Rural Restructuring? *Journal of Rural Studies, 17*(1), 41-62.

McLachlan, R., Gilfillan, G., & Gordon, J. (2013). Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia. Canberra, Australia: Australian Government: Productivity Commission.

Newman, L., Biedrzycki, K., Patterson, J., & Baum, F. (2007). A Rapid Appraisal Case Study of South Australia's Social Inclusion Initiative *A report prepared for the Social Exclusion Knowledge Network of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (established by the World Health Organisation)*. Adelaide, Australia: Social Inclusion Unit.

Onyx, J., & Bullen, P. (2000). Measuring Social Capital in Five Communities. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 36*(1), 23-42.

Shortall, S. (2008). Are Rural Development Programmes Socially Inclusive? Social Inclusion, Civic Engagement, Participation, and Social Capital: Exploring the Differences. *Journal of Rural Studies, 24*(4), 450-457.

Smailes, P. J. (2002). From Rural Dilution to Multifunctional Countryside: Some Pointers to the Future from South Australia. *Australian Geographer, 33*(1), 79-95.

Spoehr, J., & Jain, P. (2012). *The Engaging State: South Australia's Engagement with the Asia-Pacific Region*. Adelaide, South Australia: Wakefield Press.

Stone, W. (2003). Bonding, Bridging and Linking with Social Capital. *Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin, 4*(Spring/Summer), 13-16.

Stone, W., & Hughes, J. (2001, 10-12 September). *Sustaining Communities: An Empirical Investigation of Social Capital in Regional Australia.* Paper presented at the Fifth National Conference Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia, Townsville, Australia.

Williamson, A. (2000). Gender Issues in Older Adults' Participation in Learning: Viewpoints and Experiences of Learners in the University of the Third Age (U3A). *Educational Gerontology, 26*(1), 49-66.