Connected Communities

Connectivity, place and elective belonging: community and later life

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Executive Summary

The review addressed 'Social networks and later life' and 'The impact of Information and communication technologies (ICT) on community and older people'. Based around a series of workshops and symposia the project showed that while, for some, communities may be 'under siege', others may be reconstructing localities in their own image, linking 'personal' and 'place' biographies. The significance of place is important in terms of attachment, denser social networks and changing context, but there is a complex inter-relationship between retirement migration, historical labour markets and the experience of poverty in later life. Age and ageing appear to be related negatively to network size, closeness to network members and numbers in non-primary group ties, and related positively to frequency of socializing with neighbours, religious participation and volunteering. Research indicates that the relationship between volume of contact and network membership is 'U shaped' and that the heterogeneity of ageing means that age cannot be assumed to be a universally negative influence on social connectedness. Developments in ICT add a new dimension. However, the literature on ICT and later life tends to frame older people as 'passive', 'dependent' receivers. Recommendations for future research are made in light of this.

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Key words

Ageing; Belonging; Community; ICT; Later Life; Social Networks

Introduction

This paper presents preliminary findings and a summary of the work undertaken as part of an AHRC funded review of the literature addressing community, connectivity and later life. Two key theme areas were addressed; 'Social networks and later life' and 'The impact of Information and communication technologies (ICT) on community and older people'. In addition to a literature review the project team organised a series of workshops and symposia bringing together researchers, scholars, practitioners, and people from industry and the third sector undertaking work in these fields to discuss concepts, methods, research findings, future research ideas and to present working papers.

Summary of findings from literature, workshops and symposia

The first Symposium was held at the annual conference of the British Gerontological Society in July 2011 under the title *'Connectivity, place and elective belonging: community and later life'*. Chaired by Professor Paul Higgs (UCL), three papers were presented. Professor Chris Phillipson (Keele) addressed *'Globalization, Community Change and Constructions of Ageing: social connections and economic divisions'*. He noted how views that groups were becoming 'detached' from community life became familiar during the 1990s and early 2000s, reflecting arguments about a so-called decline in social capital and an apparent loosening of close-knit ties. However, debates on globalization have introduced variations to this narrative: first, highlighting the possibility that local ties might become more, not less, important in a global world; second, noting complexity at a local level, an example being the embedding of transnational communities within neighbourhoods; third, pointing to the development of distinctive forms of mobility, with people crossing borders, and moving into and creating new spaces. Such developments suggest a different approach to the role of community in later life. Communities may indeed be 'under siege' for some (like those living in areas with high levels of deprivation); but others may be reconstructing localities in their own image – linking 'personal' and 'place' biographies. In both instances there is a case for new ways of thinking about how social connections are made or restricted through community change. Phillipson explored these themes in the context of the challenges facing older people in urban environments, highlighting: first, the case for developing new forms of 'urban citizenship' which recognise changing needs across the life course; second, dilemmas for urban environments arising from the changing needs of the body; third, connections between environmental change and population ageing. *'Mobility and connectivity in later life: exploring cohort changes in use of mobile phones'* by Chris Gilleard (UCL) presented evidence on how ICT ownership and use reflect the changing contexts of later life. Using data from three twenty first century General Household Surveys, trends in mobile phone use and ownership amongst people in their fifties, sixties and seventies were examined for the period 2000-2010. The analysis demonstrates how take up of mobile phones follows a sharper and steeper rise compared with other forms of domestic technology. On the basis of this empirical analysis Gilleard argues that this represents a shift in the nature of community in later life, with more recent cohorts of over fifties showing signs of an increased mobility in their connectivity. Ian Rees Jones presented a paper outlining initial findings from a review of the literature on social networks, connectivity and later life. Key points included evidence on how age and ageing is related negatively to network size, closeness to network members and numbers in non-primary group ties, and related positively to frequency of socializing with neighbours, religious participation and volunteering. Research indicates that the relationship between volume of contact and network

membership is 'U shaped' and that the heterogeneity of ageing means that age cannot be assumed to be a universally negative influence on social connectedness. Indeed research indicates that some life transitions (e.g. retirement and bereavement) may increase connectedness. Developments in ICT add a new dimension to the relationship between ageing and social connectedness. The quality and extent of evidence on trends in internet use and their relationship with age and generation varies and although there is a clear decline in ownership and use with age this simple relationship hides rapid growth and heterogeneity within older groups. Critical points from the literature on ICT and later life include a tendency to frame older people as 'passive', 'dependent' receivers; a focus on how 'comfort' levels vary by age and type of technology; a focus on surveillance and control in the 4th age; and gaps in the literature with respect to how older people use ICT and the meanings they attach to technology.

The first workshop held in London on Friday 8th July 2011 addressed 'Community, Place and Well Being in Later Life'. Speakers included Professor Paul Milbourne (Cardiff) who presented research on '*Older people and poverty in rural places: material hardships, cultural denials and social inclusions*'. The paper reviewed the literature on poverty and rurality highlighting a range of issues including multiple forms of disadvantage, institutional disengagement and participation beyond the labour market. The significance of place in terms of attachment, denser social networks and changing context was discussed together with the complex inter-relationship between retirement migration, historical labour markets and the experience of rural poverty. Drawing on his extensive research Professor Milbourne presented findings that signalled the normalisation of poverty across the life-course, and the strategies individuals engaged in to secure necessities and cope with low incomes. The construction of place, connections with the landscape and higher levels of satisfaction with community and a strong sense of belonging among older people in poverty was also covered as was the rapidity of change and responses of state welfare agencies to rural poverty among older groups. Dr Kieran Walsh (National University of Ireland Galway) reported research findings on '*Diversity, Attachment and Exclusion in Dynamic Communities: Ageing in Rural Ireland and Northern Ireland*'. He addressed the double jeopardy of mobility and social connectedness, the romantic rhetoric and nostalgia associated with ageing in rural areas, and the equivocal effects of disconnection, disassociation and isolation. The decline of 'social visiting' in rural areas was seen as an important indicator of social change affecting standard accounts of community and ageing. Finally Dr Wendy Martin, Professor Christina Victor and Maria Zubair (Brunel University) presented findings from a study of older South Asians; '*Perceptions and experiences of community, place and transnational connectivity amongst older South Asians living in the UK*'. This ESRC funded study addressed gaps in our knowledge with respect to daily life and understandings of issues such as care and support in 'non-metropolitan' locations. Methodological issues relating to sampling, recruitment and cross-cultural research were discussed in depth with a particular focus on using visual maps in combination with text to gain understanding of who is important in participants lives when, where and what is important and how these are inter-related. Discussion centred on how religion plays a central part in people's social lives, and how family care and support have very different meanings to formal care and support. Forms of reciprocity, social and material exchange appear to form a complex fabric of local and transnational relationships.

The second workshop in Bangor on Friday 16th September 2011 addressed '*Community, Connectivity, ICT and Later Life*'. Speakers included Dr Panayiota Tsatsou (Swansea) who discussed '*Digital Divide in Minority Communities in Wales: the Role of Age*'. An overview of the literature on ICT use suggested that there is a paucity of good quality

studies and that there needs to be a more appropriate contextualisation of the phenomenon of the digital divide. The example of studies of internet use in Wales was employed to identify factors associated with lack of engagement in later life including: lack of relevance and lack of knowledge alongside social, personal and identity characteristics, such as ethnicity/language; socio-economic location and age; or living in a rural area where broadband availability is still patchy. Dr Miranda Leontowitsch (St George's University of London) presented on *'Researching later life online - a new arena for qualitative research methods'*. Analysis of ONS data on Internet Access at household and individual level shows that older people are utilising digital technologies in increasing numbers but the usage of these technologies may differ. For example, patterns of online purchases included medicine, in addition to prescription-free medicine; computer software and hardware; holidays and travel arrangements. Issues relating to researching online were also explored. In broad terms ICT can be used to do two different kinds of research: using ICT to research how older people use the internet (e.g. ethnography, interviewing) and using ICT as a tool to access samples of older people and to collect data from them. In *'But obviously not for me': robots, laboratories and the defiant identity of older test participants'* Dr Louis Neven (Lancaster) discussed attempts to develop robotic support for older people. This ethnographic study highlighted the importance of studying the way older people are represented in technology design (in this case a robot). The research suggests that representations made by older participants themselves are not taken into account in design. Taking these representations into account could prevent age(ist) scripts, whereas a focus on being old and frail could lead to resistance and non-use, An important finding is that there is a risk of 'double naturalization' of age scripts, and there is a need for more reflexive redesign of technologies better adapted to the practices and identities of older users. Designers are not solely responsible for this situation and media, policy makers, scientists and engineers also share responsibility for creating more refined user representations. Ms Nada Savitch (Innovations in Dementia) provided a perspective from the social enterprise sector and presented excerpts from a film showing walking activities among a group of people with early onset dementia and discussed *'How can we support people with dementia to stay connected?'*. Drawing on examples of projects undertaken by Innovations in Dementia, she described potential ways of using knowledge about real social networks, and issues around using computers, to ensure that people with dementia stay connected. Finally, Dr Sergio Sayago (Dundee University) discussed a range of ICT projects involving older people: *'Human-Computer Interaction with Older People through an ethnographical lens: everyday use of ICT and its evolution over time'*, drawing on findings from an ethnographic study with 388 older people with mild-to-moderate age-related changes in functional abilities over a 3-year period using ICT in adult educational centres. The research suggests that the most common view of older people is as individuals with a collection of 'limitations' including age-related changes in functional abilities, little experience with ICT and low levels of education. But, from a participant perspective older people express a strong desire to be independent, ordinary, competent and social computer users.

A final project symposium will be held at the 64th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in November 2011. Led by Professor Ian Rees Jones (Bangor) the symposium will draw together different theoretical perspectives on community, connectivity and later life, and identify future research areas for social gerontology to address. Dr Chris Gilleard and Professor Paul Higgs will present a paper on *'Connectivities in the Third Age: from fixity to fluidity?'* examining changes in the nature and form of community in later life. Later life was seen, traditionally, to be rooted in the spatial location of the neighbourhood. Within this paradigm, movement

represented risk - of dissolving the safety, solidarity and social networks of the local community. Developments in technology, travel and tourism have eroded the centrality of place replacing the risks of mobility with the opportunities provided by alternative post-work communities and retirement migration. Examination of these new connectivities in later life provides an important vector for understanding the development of the Third Age. Martin Hyde of Stress Research Institute (Stockholm University) will present research addressing some possible macro-level influences on these geographies of attachment in later life. Finally Ian Rees Jones will discuss the theoretical and empirical research addressing social networks and well-being in later life focusing on the relationship between social connectivity, attachment to place and belonging and levels of well-being in the context of a networked society.

Outputs

A joint research paper by Gilleard, Higgs and Jones entitled 'Connectivity in later life: exploring the generational divide in mobile cell phone ownership' has been submitted to *Information, Communication and Society*. Following the November symposium a final review of literature and workshop findings will be completed and used as a basis for further empirical work, research proposals and publications.

Recommendations for future research

The preliminary findings from the literature reviews and workshop discussions suggest several directions for future research. Conceptual work is required on the impact of social change and new technology on later life, addressing questions of reflexivity, individualization and the rapidity of technological change, and how these transform or reinforce understandings and meanings of community and belonging in later life. Methodological work is required on how different approaches to researching engagement with these new technologies can be developed. These include participatory and ethical issues, the construction of data and information on, through and with ICT, and how this relates to individual, group and community identity. Empirical work needs to be informed by a greater awareness of the heterogeneity of later life and the multiple factors leading older people to be more, or less, engaged with new 'networked' societies. This should consist of a mix of qualitative and quantitative research involving comparative work at European levels and beyond and includes the need to undertake more detailed secondary analysis of existing large data sets addressing use of ICT alongside measures of well-being, social networks and connectivity in later life. Ethnographic research on new technologies and the experience of and meanings associated with living with or without the new technologies is a further important area for development.

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> "*to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities*."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

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