Being, belonging and bestowing: differing degrees of community involvement amongst rural elders in England and Wales

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Abstract Government exhortations for full community involvement in their locales in England and Wales have particular significance for rural elders as the literature suggests that they are amongst the most active in this sphere. But different people have different propensities to ‘join in’. A taxonomy of different degrees of involvement in community is derived: antagonising, absenting, being, belonging, bestowing and communing. Being, belonging and bestowing are explored empirically, because they are the elements of principal concern to policy, making use of surveys of rural elders in six locations in England and Wales. A minority of respondents undertook bestowing activity (actively assisting others or taking part in voluntary activity) but most felt there were benefits from being (just living in a place) or belonging (having an identity with place) to a community. Of those who did not join in, most claimed that this was because they did not want to. Education and qualifications had the strongest association with ‘joining in’, although income and wealth per se had little impact. Two lessons for government community policy are important. First, many older people do not wish to ‘join in’, and second, the variables that tended to be associated with

participation may not be that easy to influence through community policy.

Keywords Being · Belonging · Bestowing · Social capital

Introduction: community involvement and public policy

For 25 years or more, Governments in most western economies have sought to increase the involvement of communities in their own affairs. The literature suggests that this has been with one, or a combination, of at least three motivations. *Deliberative democracy* (Dryzek 1987) describes the development of the desire on the part of governments genuinely to empower communities, to allow them to become more active in their governance and development. *Responsible participation* (Habermas 1984) seeks to place obligations (rather than just opportunities) on communities to check the spiralling costs of welfarism, reduce the size of government and save on exchequer cost. *Neo-liberalism* (Lemke 2001), thirdly, champions the rights of the individual to be free from the interference of the State.

In England and Wales, these motivations have combined in various measure, sometimes unwittingly, in the development of policies for community involvement in which older people have been expected to play their part. Prime Minister Thatcher from 1979 introduced a neo-liberal deregulatory governance framework coupled with exhortations for the ‘active citizen’ to take responsibility for community cohesion through volunteering, charity, philanthropy and self-help (Parker 2002). Prime Minister Major’s ‘citizen’s charter’ from 1992 would empower citizens through the market place ensuring greater value in public expenditure (Pottinger 1995; Faulks 1998).

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The transition from 18 years of Conservative administrations to New Labour in 1997 changed the ‘community involvement’ policy frame little, but the claimed motivation for the new ‘third way’ politics was to seek equilibrium between deliberative democracy (rights) and responsible participation (responsibilities) (Giddens 1998; Stoker 2004). Specific policy exhortations for the development of social capital (DCLG 2006) and community empowerment (DCLG 2007) matured during these New Labour administrations, extending into the term of Prime Minister Brown which produced, amongst other exhortations, guidance on how to engender a sense of belonging (DCLG 2009a).

The 2010 Coalition Government (Conservative/Liberal Democrat) has sustained this commitment to community involvement with the rhetoric of the Big Society and passing down the powers and responsibilities of governance to ‘localities’. The structural Reform Plan of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG 2010) states:

Our ambition is localism. Real change driven by local people working together in their communities’ (p. 2).

One of the imperfections of this strand of policy is, of course, that not everyone has the same propensity to ‘join in’ (Willmott 1989). Community members, both young and old, will have both different motivations for becoming involved and different abilities to offer (Cameron 2007; Fiorina 1999). Others will be constrained by ill health (often significant amongst rural elders) or lack of time, and others still simply will have no interest, according privacy a higher priority than community (Castells 1997).

The purpose of this paper is to explore these differing tendencies to become involved in community activity amongst older people living in rural England and Wales. It makes use of a large doorstep face-to-face interview questionnaire survey conducted in the summer of 2009 of 900 people of 60 years of age and over.¹ Whilst the survey as a whole was concerned to elicit a range of information and opinions about rural community life amongst rural elders, a number of specific questions were asked about people’s involvement in their communities. These are articulated within this paper where their results are discussed. Information from the survey about socio-demographic characteristics allows an exploration of some of the

potential influences that lie behind the differential desire to ‘take part’.

Community and social capital

Older people are considered to have a higher degree of involvement in their communities than other age groups (Lowe 2010) and rural communities a greater degree of involvement than urban ones (Braun and Lowe 2005). Smith (2001) even suggests that the modern social construction of ‘community’ is essentially rural, developed to describe a range of village relationships. Rural elders therefore provide a fruitful platform on which to build an exploration of degrees of community involvement. Communities broadly are understood to be of three types. The thrust of community policy noted above relates mainly to *communities of place* although this place can be at different scales (Shacheli 1999). *Communities of interest* are exemplified in the survey of older people reported here by membership of the church, the golf club, village societies, the National Trust and so on. Smith (2001) identifies a third type of community—*communion*—which he considers to be a sense of ethereal attachment to a place or an interest: a *spirit* of community.

The notion of social capital can be used to help explain community relations in all three of these types of community since it describes the development of social networks (Leadbeater 1999) and co-operative relations (Avis 2003). Social capital in its policy sense noted above (DCLG 2006) commonly distinguishes bonding, bridging and linking capitals. Bonding capital is used to describe ties between different individuals in similar situations—for example friends, family, neighbours and colleagues. Bridging capital describes more distant, less interpersonal ties that embrace people across different groups and social contexts (Putnam 1995, 2000), and linking capital connects people to power (for example, political or financial) whether held by individuals or organisations (Cote and Healy 2001).

Specifically for rural elders, Moseley and Pahl (2007) note the ‘self-gratification’ that all forms of social capital bring to rural older people. Gillies and Edwards (2006), too, suggest that for rural elders, bonding capital can enhance a sense of identity. Li et al. (2008) also suggest that higher levels of social capital amongst rural elders can lead to higher levels of civic engagement, thus helping to achieve governmental policy goals. At the European policy level, for example, the Structural Funds and LEADER programmes have *required* the mobilisation of social capital through a broader base of community decision-making as a condition of funding. Older people have had an important role to play in this (Burch et al. 2003).

¹ This paper derives from a research project funded by the United Kingdom Research Councils under the New Dynamics of Ageing Programme, entitled Grey and Pleasant Land? An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Connectivity of Older People in Rural Civic Society. As a whole, it involves an exploration of the voluntary collective action of older people formed around shared interests, purposes and values such as formal and informal associations and community groups.

Communities of place provide a suitable lens through which to explore social capital because, first, they provide the most appropriate theatre for the study of different levels of commitment (Willmott 1989). Second, public policy concerned with community involvement focuses on the community of place through *localism*. Whilst earlier studies of rural elders in England and Wales have sought to uncover ways to *improve* this kind of community involvement through, for example, the development of networks (Wenger 1995), the focus of this paper lies in uncovering *difference* in community commitment. In so doing it seeks to counter a dominance of community studies that have tended to focus on communities as single entities (James and James 2001), with little attention being paid to diversity within communities of older people (Frazer 1999) which can often conceal tensions and fractures within them, impairing the potential of social capital.

Degrees of involvement with community

A number of different degrees of ‘involvement’ in community as locale are described in the literature. Mohan (2001) notes its heterogeneity: from complete disengagement to full commitment; from high levels of social capital to fractured communities. Undoubtedly, these degrees of involvement lie on a continuum, but it is of value heuristically to identify degrees of involvement as discrete entities. A useful baseline here is the state of simply *being* in a community since, as Lee and Newby (1983) point out, the fact that people live close to one another does not, of itself, suggest any active interaction between them.

Whilst ‘being’ suggests an indifference to involvement with community, there is a literature that suggests more negative attitudes. *Absenting* involves the deliberate choice to ‘opt out’ of community activity, usually for the desire of privacy (Bailey 2000), rather than because people are actually socially excluded (Fiorina 1999). Writings about *antagonism* (actively seeking to oppose or disrupt) within community behaviour are more widespread than for absenting (Proctor 2006). These occur where bonding social capital creates strong sub-groups that then exclude others within the community. Moseley and Pahl (2007) write of the antagonism between rural elders in Yorkshire (England) mining villages, according to whether people did (one sub-group), or did not (another sub-group) go on strike in the 1980s. Antagonism between these groups (now between older people) remains strong nearly 30 years later.

If absenting and antagonising lie on the negative side of community involvement from the neutrality of ‘being’, *belonging* lies on the positive side and connotes the existence of social capital. It is a difficult construct to define from the literature as it is commonly used to embrace all

forms of community involvement. Whilst Therborn (1991) suggests that belonging is about being part of a community of shared meanings, it does not necessarily lead to any inclination to become *actively* involved in any community (Mee and Wright 2009). Belonging, however, may well be a *precursor* to active community involvement (Hagerty and Williams 1999). *Bestowing* is considered here to be where a person makes an active contribution to making their locale a better place to be, thought to be particularly high where bonding social capital is strong (Bagnall et al. 2003). Such bestowing is at the core of government policies in England and Wales for active community involvement.

Communing provides perhaps the most intense form of community involvement (Crow and Allan 1994). It has been suggested that in the extreme, involvement in community can be a spiritual experience. Frazer (1999) suggests that in certain circumstances, experiences of community ‘will be both euphoric and fleeting’ (p. 83). With this summary of different degrees of involvement in community in general (and of different levels of social capital), their measurement specifically amongst rural elders is now considered. Focus is given to the measurement of the central range of these degrees of involvement, being, belonging and bestowing, because these form the core elements of concern for policy and because they are the most straightforward to frame empirically.

Methods

The empirical study reported here, undertaken in the summer of 2009, comprised a doorstep survey of 900 people of 60 years or age and over. The study was conducted in six study areas, selected to explore a range of rural characteristics. Earlier studies of rural areas and rural policy have tended to stress the special needs of rural areas, invariably in contrast to urban ones (Smart and Wright 1983). These earlier notions focused on a common set of ‘rural problems’ (low incomes, economic decline, high house prices and declining services) that became thought of as pervasive of all rural areas, supported by the ubiquity of agriculture in rural areas. However, according to Hodge and Monk (2004, p. 263), these kinds of characterisations are ‘stylised fallacies’ because, as generalisations about rural areas, they were often partial, inaccurate, unhelpful or misleading. Counterurbanisation has meant that while remoter rural areas have continued to experience economic and social hardships, the more affluent have begun to move into the more accessible countryside for both work (including commuting) and retirement purposes. This has profoundly altered the social composition of these rural localities and set them on differentiated development paths (Ward and Lowe 1998).

In addition, there has been an increasing recognition that agriculture no longer had a central role to play within the rural economy. Declining incomes and employment removed the primacy of agriculture economically, but also socially. With this recognition of overall differences in rural areas came the acceptance that different approaches to rural decision-making in different areas, was required. This has led to a changing emphasis in contemporary rural public policy which has become concerned to manage *difference* in some way: in the main policies have been designed to ameliorate such differences (Defra's PSA targets on rural productivity at the regional level, for example) but others, too, have been developed to recognise and celebrate them (the development of 'localness' and endogenous development in policy). One of the consequences of recognising this differentiation in rural policy is that increasingly, rural areas are being viewed as spatial or territorial entities, rather than in a sectoral way (Goodwin 1998). It is essential that the social, cultural, political and economic characteristics of rural areas are taken into account in the developmental process and in the way that they are characterised (Härkönen and Kahila 1999; Marsden et al. 1993).

Case study and sample selection

In recognition of the increasingly differentiated countryside, the study was undertaken in accordance with a three-way area categorisation: (1) a remote and deprived area, (2) a less remote and deprived area and (3) a relatively affluent and accessible area. Two areas were selected for each of the categories, one in England and one in Wales. The areas were selected using data from the Office for National Statistics. A number of criteria were established for each of the three location types including levels of deprivation,² housing tenure, accessibility etc. In England, district boundary was chosen as the baseline case study area, within which 3 specific settlements were chosen. The district was large enough to enable quality statistical comparison with other districts across the region and yet small enough to provide a relatively homogenous area within which to select settlements with similar characteristics. For Wales, the Unitary Authority was too large an area to provide the homogeneity required and as such, the electoral division was chosen as the area on which to base the case study area.

Once the baseline areas had been selected, a settlement within each area was chosen to best represent the distinct set of characteristics relative to the district/region. This was

done by identifying all of the settlements that met the criteria and considering other characteristics such as the size of the area, compatibility of the English and Welsh areas and the size of the population over the age of 60. Once the study areas had been confirmed, census data were acquired detailing contact details and the age of the residents in the areas.

From this, all residents over the age of 60 were identified and were sent a letter detailing the research project and providing the opportunity to opt out. Those who did not opt out were then visited by researchers who again detailed the project and asked if they would be willing to participate.

Research design

Those who agreed took part in a 20 minute door-step face-to-face quantitative survey, made up of closed questions, many of which used Likert scale measurements. The survey questions were developed by a team of experienced gerontologists and social scientists, and covered a range of themes including community involvement, loneliness and access to services. Questions of most relevance to this study (exploring being, belonging and bestowing) were informed by and developed from an in-depth literature review.

By incorporating the different types of study areas, a wide variety of characteristics was incorporated into the sample. In addition, where appropriate, it was possible for comparisons to be made between the study areas, as well as between different respondent characteristics (e.g. income, education, etc.). Importantly in the context of this study, differences between the study areas, or between England and Wales, were generally not found to be significant in relation to levels of being, belonging and bestowing. Instead, a variety of socio-economic variables was found to be more significant. Therefore, throughout the following discussion, data are reported based on all 900 responses to the survey, rather than disaggregated into the different study areas.

Measures

The three core constructs of the study, 'being', 'belonging' and 'bestowing' were assessed through quantitative Likert scale questions which asked participants for their opinion of the community in which they live and their level of involvement in it. The measures were selected based on the findings of an in-depth literature review. Feelings of 'being' were assessed through questions associated with general attitudes towards the community such as whether the participant felt safe and secure. Feelings of 'belonging' were assessed by addressing participants' interpersonal relationships with other community members as well as

² The index of multiple deprivation, income deprivation ranking and geographical deprivation domain were each used to inform the selection of the study areas.

feelings of loneliness. Finally, feelings of ‘bestowing’ were assessed by questions associated with reciprocal activity and volunteering. Participants were asked about general levels of ‘bestowing’ in their community as well as the nature of their own bestowing activity.

Data analysis

Once the survey was complete, the data were subjected to various stages of analysis using SPSS 19. While the full survey explored various aspects of ageing in rural areas, for the purposes of this paper, a number of questions was of particular interest. These included questions that asked respondents for their feelings towards their community, levels of belonging, loneliness, community involvement and reciprocal activities. As well as descriptive analysis of the data, Pearson χ^2 tests were used to explore the relationships between various variables. Where appropriate statistically significant relationships ($p \leq .05$) are reported in the following sections.

Results

The opening set of questions in the survey asked rural elders to express their views about the community in which they live, on a five point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree and do not know). Table 1 below shows the ranking of these views based on the percentage of the respondents who ‘strongly agreed’ with each statement.

By a considerable margin, the most important attachment to community relates to ‘being’: the community is safe and secure (63 % of respondents strongly agree). Three of the four most common characterisations of ‘belonging’ to a community are at the bottom of this list. The second most important characteristic of community, however, was a ‘bestowing’ one.

The question that asked specifically about ‘belonging’ was ‘what gives you a sense of belonging in your community?’ Again, a Likert scale of responses was invited—very important, fairly important, not very important, not at all important and do not know. The results are ranked in order in Table 2 below against the ‘very important’ response.

The table clearly illustrates Forrest and Kearns (2001) distinction between neighbourhoods and neighbouring. The highest band of responses in Table 2 (all responses of 70 % and above of the respondents finding these characteristics very important) relate to neighbourhoods rather than neighbouring, again clearly indicating the primacy of ‘being’ over ‘belonging’ or ‘bestowing’.

Significantly lower responses (in the 50–60 % band) relate to aspects of ‘belonging’: being recognised, knowing people and having friends nearby. ‘Bestowing’, in the form of doing things for others, appears to be accorded a much lower priority: only 40 % of the survey felt that this was very important. The other responses are lower than 40 % and are a mixture of belonging and bestowing with a smaller element of being in these categories.

The only exception to this pattern is ‘having good neighbours’. Although this is still less important than the four measures of ‘being’, (69 % of respondents felt it to be very important) as a mixture of belonging and bestowing, neighbourliness appears to be a significant part of community for rural elders.

Questions also were asked in the survey about a *lack* of a sense of ‘belonging’. The first of these concerned loneliness. Although only 10 % of the respondents experienced a general sense of loneliness, two factors were found to be statistically correlated. Perhaps not surprisingly, loneliness increases with increased age ($p = .032$). Some 5.8 % of 60–69 year olds ($n = 22$) agreed with the statement ‘I feel a general sense of loneliness’, compared to 13.2 % of those aged over 80 ($n = 24$). Levels of loneliness also decreased with affluence ($p = .046$). Some 6.2 % of respondents that are living comfortably ($n = 20$) feel lonely compared with

Table 1 Differential attachment to community amongst rural elders in England and Wales

View on community	% Strongly agreeing	Type of attachment
I feel safe and secure in my own home	63	Being
I feel safe to go out on my own after it gets dark	47	Being
My community is clean and tidy	38	Being
People in this community can be trusted	41	Belonging
I know how to find out about what health care services and information are available	37	Belonging
People in this community generally get along together	35	Belonging
This is a close knit community	31	Belonging
I live in a community which cares for people when they become sick or frail	38	Bestowing
People around here are willing to help their neighbours	50	Bestowing

Table 2 Characteristics of a sense of belonging to the community

	Very important (%)
Having low levels of crime	76
Having a feeling of space around you	75
Being surrounded by beautiful physical landscape	75
Living in a community that is a quiet place to live	70
Having good neighbours	69
Knowing people in your community	56
Having friends nearby	54
Having people in my community recognise me and talk to me	53
Doing things for others	40
Having family nearby	38
Having good access to social services and other support agencies	34
Being close to amenities and services	34
Having others who will do things for you	32
Having a place of worship	32
Having clubs and organisations that you belong to	29
Being in a community that is easy to get around	29
Living in a community that has good weather/ climate	9

23.5 % of those who are finding it difficult ($n = 8$). No other contextual variable was found to have a statistically significant association with a sense of loneliness. Although a statistically significant relationship was found between levels of affluence and levels of loneliness, no statistically significant differences were found between the different study areas in relation to levels of loneliness. The reason for this is not clear and would warrant further investigation. In addition, care should be taken when considering these results due to the small number of respondents who categorised themselves as lonely.

When respondents were asked if they ‘missed having people around in the community’, nearly 15 % felt that they did. Here, there were correlations with marital status and age. Singletons were significantly more likely to miss having people around than married people. Some 25.9 % of singletons (always single or widowed $n = 12$) missed having people around compared to 10.7 % of respondents who are married ($n = 49$; $p = .029$). This ‘missing people’ also increased with age ($p = .001$). Only 6 % of people felt ‘excluded within my community’ and wealth was the only variable with which a statistically significant relationship was found: poorer people felt more excluded than richer ones ($p = .002$).

While participants were asked for their general views of bestowing activity throughout the survey (e.g. ‘people around here are willing to help their neighbours’), two questions were asked directly about individuals’ own

‘bestowing’ activities: ‘do you undertake any activities that involve assisting others?’, and ‘do you undertake any voluntary work?’ Some 47 % of those responding to the first of these questions felt that they did assist others and 38 % claimed that they did undertake some form of voluntary work. In both cases, the majority of respondents clearly did not see themselves as ‘bestowers’. Some 28 % of respondents claimed both to assist others and to indulge involuntary work.

Here, there are a number of statistically significant correlations between a propensity to ‘bestow’ and a number of socio-economic characteristics. Married people, for example, are statistically more likely to undertake both of these assisting and volunteering ‘bestowing’ activities than single or widowed people ($p = .000$): 31.4 % of married people ($n = 142$) ‘bestow’ compared with 22.3 % of respondents who are single ($n = 60$). Bestowing also reduces, perhaps not unexpectedly, with increasing age: 35 % of those between 60 and 69 ($n = 132$) were ‘bestowers’ but this dropped to 29 % for 70–79 year olds ($n = 90$), 15 % for respondents in their 80s ($n = 24$) and 4 % for those aged 90 plus ($p = .000$). Here, again as might be expected, health has a statistically significant role to play ($p = .000$). Some 36 % of respondents who considered their health to be very good ($n = 95$), felt that they both assisted other people and took part in voluntary work. This fell to 28 % for those in good health ($n = 93$), 23 % for those in fair health ($n = 44$), 21 % in poor health ($n = 14$) and only 13 % who considered themselves to be in very poor health ($n = 2$). A one-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore potential differences between the study areas in relations to levels of bestowing. The results showed that respondents living in category 1 areas (remote and deprived) were statistically significantly more likely to partake in bestowing activities ($p = .005$ and $.000$).

A strong statistical association was found between ‘bestowing’ activity and (former) occupational status and levels of qualifications ($p = .000$). ‘Bestowing’ declined consistently as (former) occupational status declined. Respondents who had held the most senior positions during their working lives were most likely to undertake ‘bestowing’ activity [38 % of the claimed to both assist others and volunteer ($n = 35$)] and this declined to 25 % amongst those in elementary occupations ($n = 10$). This consistent decline in bestowing was also evident in respect of highest levels of qualifications attained, but was even more stark than for (former) occupational status ($p = .000$): some 55 % of those who held a postgraduate qualification (Masters or PhD) ($n = 28$) claimed both to assist and volunteer but only 15 % of those with no formal qualifications at all ($n = 29$) claimed to.

The relationship between bestowing and remoteness is less clear. The most accessible and affluent study area in

England clearly indicated the highest level of bestowing (some 43 % of interviewees in this area claimed to be both assisters and volunteers) and the Welsh remote and deprived area indicated the lowest level (only 10 % of interviewees both assisted and volunteered). All of the other areas, however, consistently indicated around 30 % of interviewees as being both assisters and volunteers. Based on the findings of this study, remoteness appears to be less strongly related to community involvement as a person's occupational status and levels of qualifications.

Chi squared tests found no statistically significant relationships between the propensity to undertake voluntary work ($p = .056$) or activities involving assisting others ($p = .186$) and the length of residence of older people in their community. This is at variance with Augé's (1995) findings. Nor was there any statistical relationship between bestowing and affluence ($p = .360$ and $.703$), at variance with Hidalgo and Hernandez's (2001) findings. The relationship between the undertaking of bestowing activity and regular contact with friends ($p = .345$) in the literature, too—the former is considered to increase with increases in the latter—also is weak despite George et al. (1989) finding this to be significant and Sampson (1988) asserting that it was the strongest influence that he studied.

Those respondents who did not undertake any voluntary work at all were asked if they would like to and only 16 % said that they would. Marital status (married people were more likely to want to volunteer than singletons $p = .024$) and age (younger people were more likely to want to volunteer than older people $p = .000$) were the only statistically significant correlations with this desire to undertake voluntary work. Overall, 81 % ($n = 747$) of the survey claimed that they were as involved in their community as they wanted to be.

Finally, the survey explored the factors that limited active participation in community activities—bestowing—on the part of respondents. These are shown in Table 3 below.

It is striking here that a lack of interest (a *preference* not to participate) was cited by participants as almost as strong as all of the other limitations put together, which can generally be perceived as constraints. Clearly, those who are not interested have no wish to be 'bestowers' even though they may well consider themselves to 'be' in, or 'belong' to, their communities. Interestingly in this context too, the only factor that has a statistically significant relationship with this lack of interest is friendship ($p = .002$). Those with the closest friendship ties are least likely to be 'not interested' in becoming involved in community activity. Their lack of involvement, when it does occur, is therefore likely to be due to a constraint rather than a preference. There are no other socio-demographic factors that have any statistically significant association with this lack of interest.

While the results of this study provide some interesting findings in relation to being, belonging and bestowing amongst older people living in rural areas, it should be noted that the study was not able to capture the views all rural elders. Potential participants were given the opportunity to opt out of the study before the researchers visited the area. Some opted out for health reasons or because of time constraints. For others, the reason for opting out is not known. By its nature, the survey was therefore self-selecting. This limitation was overcome as far as possible by adopting a face-to-face, door-step approach, as well as using Welsh speaking researchers in Wales where requested. In addition, the survey data show a wide range of respondent characteristics relating to, for example, age, health, income.

Discussion

These findings have significant implications for public policy not only because of the increasing importance that governments place on community participation through the development of different forms of social capital but also because of the increasing size and proportion of the ageing population (Office for National Statistics 2011). Older people are becoming more significant over time as 'key players' in community mobilisation because of their available time and skills (Lowe 2010). And this mobilisation is likely to be most active in rural areas: the DCLG (2009b) found rurality to be one of the key triggers to community cohesion.

The findings of the research reported here are informative in two main respects. First, it must be recognised that bestowing is neither universal nor a universal aspiration. A majority of the rural older population in the surveys reported here is content to be in a place and even belong to it without taking an active part in the community, even if explicit opportunities present themselves. Exercising the right 'not to take part' is the strongest determinant of non-participation, rather than specific constraints.

Table 3 Factors influencing non-involvement in bestowing

	%
Not interested	27
Limitations in health	11
Lack of time	9
Lack of access to transport	6
Lack of money	2
Lack of confidence	2
Feeling unsafe	1
Don't get on with those already involved	1

The second important aspect of the findings lies in the variables that were found to have a statistically significant relationship with bestowing. Age and health behaved largely as might be expected: as age increases, active participation in community declines and loneliness increases, the same was found in relation to decline in health. This is important relative to the DCLG (2009b) findings, that age had a *positive* association with community participation: as people moved from youth into middle age, community participation increased (Laurence and Heath 2008). It is likely that there is a ‘lifecycle’ impact of age on participation where the ‘young’ old must be distinguished from the ‘old’ old. Consistent with the DCLG (2009b) findings, qualifications and (former) occupational status were found to have the strongest positive association with community participation (DTZ 2007), but in addition in the survey reported here, marital status appeared to have a strong role to play. Singletons (single, widowed and divorced) are less likely to be community actives than married people, despite the fact that they perceived themselves to be more lonely.

As with other surveys (Ipsos-MORI 2007), levels of income and wealth were not found to have any relationship with active community participation, although loneliness and exclusion were perceived to increase with poverty. In the survey reported here, remoteness, length of residence in a community and friendship ties also were not found to be associated with community participation. While outside of the scope of this paper, the data would benefit from regression analysis to further explore the relationships between the variables and the various levels of community participation.

Policies are being developed to increase community participation (at least for communities of place or locale) through the development of Community Strategies (DCLG 2009b) and Neighbourhood Plans (DCLG 2011). In this context, United Kingdom Governments feel that the relationship between belonging and bestowing is axiomatic:

‘People who feel that they belong to their local area will get involved with local schemes and initiatives, will help their neighbours’ (DCLG 2009a, p. 3).

But the research evidence suggests that it is not. The factors that *trigger* active participation, at least amongst rural elders (such as occupational status and qualification levels), are largely beyond the scope of influence of community planning per se and indeed there is no evidence to suggest that the use of such planning mechanisms is likely to have any impact on increasing active participation given that the ‘right not to participate’ is much stronger than the lack of ‘opportunity to participate’.

It is significant in the findings reported here that much social capital lies with those of higher (former) occupational status and levels of qualification. It is also significant

that the Government reports (DCLG 2009b) higher levels of active community participation in rural areas than urban ones. Both of these suggest negative equity consequences in the development of policy measures for active community participation: localism will be exploited most by the most able, educated and articulate (commonly living in rural areas) at the expense of those who are less capable of making their voice heard.

Such inequalities, too, are likely from the survey findings, to be driven more by access to knowledge, information and skills than to material wealth, reinforcing the distinction in the survey reported here in terms of the strong association between education levels and community participation but the negligible relationship with income per se. Under these circumstances, it is likely that those who reap most of the benefits of community participation will be the ones who will need them least. This could exacerbate inequalities both between communities, but also within them, and might suggest some level of redistributive ‘welfare’-based policies from Government for older people, even within the localism agenda.

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