

“In the Middle of Everywhere:” A Phenomenological Study of Mobility and Dwelling Amongst Rural Elders

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the phenomenon of *the meaning of mobility* for elders living in rural areas. A phenomenological study was undertaken with older people living in rural South West England and Wales. Ten interviews were undertaken in peoples' homes and focused on the spatial dimensions of what it was like to live in the rural area and the everyday experiences of traversing rural space. Spatial mobility was experienced by our sample as any of the possible ways that achieved personal life activities where the traverse of space was normally relevant. We describe the meaning of mobility sensitised by the terms used in the “continuum of mobilities” (Parkhurst et al., 2012): “literal mobility,” “virtual mobility,” “potential mobility,” and “imaginative mobility.”

Our phenomenological findings revealed that the transport and mobility needs of older people living in rural areas could not be meaningfully understood without understanding their well-being priorities, the kinds of movement that constituted well-being, and how this related to the phenomenon of “dwelling,” which included their feeling of “at-homeness” in their rural environment. But also what emerged was a second phenomenon that we have called *rural living as a portal to well-being in older people*. The connection between well-being and rural place was constituted by two interrelated experiences: the importance of dwelling and slowing down in older age, and the importance of a “rich textured locale” for the well-being of rural older people.

We conclude by considering how the elders in our study may have something important to remind us: that mobility and sense of place are mutually implicated and that our present culture places an over emphasis on mobility, which may obscure the value of dwelling.

Introduction

Conventional or traditional discourses about the challenges of becoming older often focus on social isolation and increasing bodily vulnerability. We acknowledge that this social and

physical emphasis is important and everything possible should continue to be done to try to support older people and to alleviate problems of social isolation and physical/health difficulties. However, beginning in the lifeworld, we will show that well-being, as a kind of “homecoming” or “at-homeness,” is not just given by social or bodily conditions, but can be intimately experienced in the context of one’s deeper connection to the natural world and its rhythms. In this regard, using the perspectives of older people, we would like to tell a story of how the natural world became intimately personal for older people and how such interconnectivity became their “bigger story” of well-being, together with their “social story” and their “bodily story.” Thus for well-being, the social context is never alone; the bodily context is never alone; all the dimensions of the lifeworld can only be seen “rhizomatically”ⁱ as always mutually influential. Here we report on a phenomenological study where a focus on the meaning of mobility expanded to deeper themes concerning elders’ well-being; a kind of spatial well-being connected to a sense of “being at home” in the richly textured places and storied landscapes within which they lived.

The term “mobility” has been used and theorised in different ways. Within transport studies, for example, it has sometimes been used in a fairly instrumental way to refer to physical movement through space. But even within these disciplines the term has come to straddle the notion of movement as both an “objective” and “subjective” phenomenon. Thus the journal *Mobilities* for example, has as its aim the examination of ... “both the large scale movement of people, objects, capital and information across the world, as well as more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public and private spaces and the travel of material things in everyday life” (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/journal.asp?issn=1745-0101&linktype=1>).

As such, the journal includes topics such as mobile spatiality and temporality, and how the meaning of mobility co-constructs identity and culture. Within this interdisciplinary field we locate this paper on the interface between human geography, health and phenomenology. Within this perspective ... “mobility is about much more than travelling from ‘A’ to ‘B’ to satisfy physiological needs: to be mobile is to participate in society; to be ‘connected’; to observe and experience community and fellow citizens directly and at close quarters” (Parkhurst et al., 2012). This growing theoretical position on mobility also includes the meaningful relationship between movement, stasis and flow (Jensen, 2012; Massey, 2005; Morley, 2006). Adey (2007) for example, studied the relationship between mobility and (im)mobility in an airport setting and focused on an inclusion of experiential phenomena such as waiting, shopping and airplane watching. An understanding of the meaning of mobility has thus been extended to include an aesthetic dimension (Ingersoll, 2006). In moving even further towards a more phenomenological perspective in this paper, we focus on the meaning of mobility as a phenomenon that is centrally characterised by both literal and existential possibility; that is, mobility involves all the ways we move both physically and experientially to connect ourselves to motivated lived possibilities.

A Phenomenon that arose Unexpectedly out of a Larger Study

The study that we report here is part of large scale research collaboration between five universities which focused on older peoples’ participation in rural civic society. The interdisciplinary study, funded by “Research Councils UK” was broad ranging and divided into a number of sub studies (work packages) that pursued particular emphases such as, involvement in leisure and cultural activities, contributions to rural community capital, and

issues of identity and diversity. This overarching study, called “Grey and Pleasant Land?” (Hennessey et al., 2012) drew on expertise from a number of different disciplines (geography, social science, psychology, economics) and employed a range of research methodologies. Our phenomenological study was part of a work package that was concerned with the mobility and transport needs of older rural people (Shergold et al., 2012). Within this work package we were interested in the potential insights that a phenomenological approach could contribute to both the conceptualisation and study of older peoples’ mobility experiences.

Beginning in the lifeworld, some alternative research questions arose that concerned the meaning of transport, the meaning of mobility and the sense of place experienced by older people living in rural areas. By focusing on the meaning of mobility, and what the meaning of mobility implies for transport, we wished to show how asking a more existential question concerning the spatial dimension of the lifeworld, could perhaps result in some novel insights about *what transport is for* in the everyday lives of older people in rural areas. As we engaged in this open ended questioning, some interesting insights emerged that we had not fully anticipated. We found that the descriptions we were eliciting from older research participants, although answering some specific interesting questions relevant to transport, also elicited descriptions about their experiences of well-being and place that went far beyond the narrower concern of mobility in itself or transport in itself. This emergent wider concern revealed that that the transport needs of older people living in rural areas could not be meaningfully understood without understanding their well-being priorities, the kinds of movement that constituted well-being, and how this related to their feeling of “at-homeness” in their rural environment. Because of the emergence of this more complex picture, this present paper will first outline the findings from our planned phenomenological topic, namely, *the meaning of mobility*. But we then follow this with a focus on some unanticipated findings that illustrate the relationship between well-being and a sense of place, and how well-being as a kind of “homecoming” or “at-homeness” is not just given by social or bodily conditions but can be intimately experienced in the context of one’s deeper connection to the natural world and its rhythms. We came to call this second emergent phenomenon: *rural living as a portal to well-being in older people*.

We now describe our methodological approach which is phenomenological in orientation and follow this by explicating aspects that are revelatory of two phenomena: *a) the meaning of mobility for rural elders*, and *b) rural living as a portal to well-being in older people*.

Our Phenomenological Study

At the beginning, we pursued an appetite for entering the **phenomenological attitude** in order to delineate our phenomenon and phenomenological research questions. This involved a sense of caution about the ways ‘mobility’ had been defined from various disciplinary and professional perspectives. As such, the “‘phenomenological attitude’... is free of value judgements from an external frame of reference and instead focuses on the meaning of the situation purely as it is given in the participants’ experience” (Wertz, 2005, p. 172). This phase resulted in a focus on the meaning of mobility for people and the formulation of “experience-near” questions that allowed older people to speak of the meaning of “traversing space,” or not, in relation to their everyday lives. Consistent with other phenomenologically oriented researchers, we wished to formulate interview questions that stayed very close to experience as lived. An “experience-near” question asks... “what an experience is like, [and] it may be helpful to be very concrete” (van Manen, 1997, p. 67). He further counsels the

following: “Ask the person to think of a specific instance, situation, person, or event. Then explore the whole experience to the fullest” (p. 67).

In this way, we wished to get close to the lifeworlds of older people living in rural areas in South West England and Wales by devising an interview that explored their everyday life, and the significance of traversing space through movement, however this movement occurred. We wanted to provide older people with maximum opportunities and possible ways to tell us about their “traverse of space.” This required setting up an interview situation that was open enough to prompt them to talk about significant places that they go to, the meaning of going to those places, why they went to those places, and what they valued about the environments in which they lived and moved. This concern, guided by lifeworld and existential sensibilities was thus much broader than the narrower question of transport and transport “needs.” It was our overall aim to seek out older peoples’ descriptions of variations of all the possible dimensions of rural living in relation to what was important or meaningful to them. Sensitised by an existential view that humans live not just in actualities but in their possibilities, we were interested in, not only the empirical events of the places that were significant to them, but all the possible ways in which they could achieve the purpose of movement. This included literal movement and non literal movement such as virtual forms of movement and imaginative forms of movement. We were not defining these alternatives in advance but wanted to engage with our research participants in such a way that it did not close them off from talking about these possibilities in whatever ways they wished to.

We undertook ten in-depth phenomenological interviews with rural elders in their own homes in Wales and South West England. These interviews were between one hour and three hours long. The sample of participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- Older people who were well and who had access to transport
- Older people who were well and who had limited access to transport
- Older people who were experiencing health difficulties to such an extent as to restrict their mobility
- Older people who could not leave their homes

We sampled from a list of volunteers who were survey participants of the much larger study (Hennessey et al., 2012) of which our study was a part. These volunteers had agreed to follow-up interviews as part of a survey exploring “Connectivity in older people in rural areas” (Curry, 2012). Ethical approval of our particular study was gained from the University of Western England Ethics Committee. Potential interviewees were contacted by letter. If older people (age range 65 years to 98 years) wished to participate in our phenomenological work, they were invited to telephone us and we then made arrangements to visit them in their own home. Interviews were undertaken on a one to one basis with the authors (but sometimes with couples), and were recorded digitally. Interviews focused on what it is like to live in the rural place of their residence. The interview also explored “must-do’s,” for example, visits to nearby places for shopping; “have-to’s,” for example, post office visits to collect a pension or medical appointments; and “want-to’s,” an exploration of the desires of older people. The range of questions were developed to allow us to understand a) the meaning of transport in people’s lives and b) the meaning of mobility within the context of rural space. We started off with a very broad open ended question: Can you describe what is it like to live in this rural area and your experience of getting around? This was then followed up by further prompts regarding the meaning and qualities of different kinds of places for them, how they

got to them, and what they did if they could not travel. The table below provides examples of the range of further prompts:

Could you describe an example of going to a place that is a particularly enjoyable place for you? How would you get to that place that is particularly enjoyable for you? If you can't get to such a place, is there anything that you could do that feels similar? Can you describe an experience of places or experiences that you would still really like to see or go? Can you describe experiences of places that you like to go on an everyday basis?
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Table 1: Example Interview Questions

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Our analysis was phenomenological in orientation. We first read each transcript with a view to understanding the integrity of what the transcript indicated as a whole; this understanding served as a holistic meaningful reference and background understanding within which the various parts and detailed meanings of the interview could be understood. We then re-read each transcript identifying changes in meaning and marked these as discrete “meaning units” which we would each consider in its own right in terms of what it could discretely reveal in relation to the phenomenon we were initially interested in. In the first case: *the meaning of mobility*; and in the second emergent case: *rural living as a portal to well-being in older people*.

We then transformed the language of each of these specific meaning units into more general expressions about the essence of that meaning (transformed meaning unit). We give two examples here of how we transformed a meaning unit in the person's own language to a transformed meaning unit that uses a more essential or general language:

Meaning Unit	Transformed Meaning Unit
We make a point of using the bus. If I do not use it I am losing. Know what I mean? So we try to use the bus at least once a week. It is why we really want to support the bus service. (We have lost the local Post Office). If you are depressed, climb a mountain. [Looking out of his window] I've got the Black mountain range looking up over there, as I said I can see through the gap, right through the Pen Y Fan, ---the highest point of the Brecon Beacons, which is 30 miles away and I know all the people over there, I know exactly what it is like all around there because I drive there most months	They make a goal of using the bus as a way to make contributions to supporting the service so that it can be sustainable. There is a feeling of being uplifted and a sense of familiarity that is carried with him as he looks across to the areas he travels and knows well.

Table 2: Meaning unit transformed to essential language (transformed meaning unit)

The next phase of the analysis involved comparing the transformed meaning units across all interview cases and clustering the most essential meanings that cohered through all the

examples of our interviewees' experiences. After this analysis we wrote an integrated description of the phenomenon that synthesised all the various meanings into "a whole" so that the phenomenon could be viewed as an essential structure. This description was supplemented by elaborating on its meaning and possible variations, for example, the kinds of mobility that were talked about, what rural space meant for people, what well-being entailed in these circumstances, and so on.

Consistent with the openness of a phenomenological study a further phenomenon emerged that was significant enough to be named in its own right as a further foundational concern of our interviewees. We have delineated this emergent phenomenon as: *rural living as a portal to well-being in older people*. We now describe our findings of our two phenomena.. Firstly, we describe the *meaning of mobility* sensitised by the "continuum of mobilities" (Parkhurst et al., 2012). Secondly, we describe the essential structure of *rural living as a portal to well in older people*.

Findings

a) The meaning of mobility for older people in rural areas

Essentially the meaning of mobility emerged as a more complex existential and broader phenomenon than the meaning of transport as conventionally defined. A broader phenomenon of "spatial mobility" emerged from our study. Although including the instrumental concerns and technologies of transport, at its most essential level, spatial mobility was experienced by our sample as *any of the possible ways that people achieve personal life activities where the traverse of space is normally relevant*. We found a number of ways in which participants expressed their traverse of space in meaningful ways, whether literally or not, whereby personal life activities are achieved. Four kinds of mobility that articulated the range of experiences in our phenomenological study emerged from this analysis. Once we were sure about the experiential distinctiveness of these four phenomena, we engaged with our interdisciplinary colleagues in the spirit of a more dialogical moment, in order to name these four kinds of mobility in a way that made sense in this interdisciplinary context (Parkhurst et al., 2012). The existence of three of the phenomena has also been suggested by the literature (e.g. Metz, 2000). We now articulate the four kinds of mobility that emerged:

Literal mobility: This meaning of mobility refers to how older people moved around outside their accommodation in literal ways and this was an important and valued aspect of rural life. Here, a sufficient range of literal transport possibilities were needed, as older people in these rural areas were easily discouraged from traversing space; a threshold of 'a hassle factor' was often experienced. The range of literal transport possibilities were divided into public and private opportunities. Private possibilities of literal transport included 'car owner who drives'; "car owner whose partner drives"; "car owner whose friend drives." The older people in the study greatly valued their access to a private vehicle and this appeared to be related to the felt importance of a kind of control and optionality that was very close at hand. A specific issue in this regard was that these activities could be discouraged by general parking problems, lack of disabled parking facilities, and in situations when commuting to busy towns, a lack of "park & ride" facilities in some cases. The public transport used by our sample concentrated mainly on commercial bus travel. Volunteer bus services were used when available, and less frequently, trains. It did not take much for our interviewees to feel sufficiently inconvenienced by public transport to the extent that they avoided its use. This

sense of significant inconvenience to the degree of non use, did not just occur due to health considerations. Problems with timetables, infrequency of service (daily and weekly), transit connections with long waits, poor disabled access, and the need to carefully plan and negotiate trips (such as hospital appointments), were all described as barriers to the unambivalent embrace of available public transport. On the other hand, as a balance to this inconvenience, there were some clear indications in which older people actively transcended or tolerated these inconveniences for three main reasons: 1) “Civic conscience,” which is characterised by a need to express a solidarity with other members of the community where rural services are being threatened. For example, a couple who have a car, where the husband drives, made a point of using the bus service at least once a week said: “if we don’t use it, we will lose it.” This civic conscience was particularly evident with regard to voluntary and pre bookable bus services, which were perceived as a more personalized bus service. 2) A variation of this is the sense that such transport should be used because, even if older people have current private transport options, they may need public services in the future (“that person who cannot drive will one day be me”). 3) Aesthetic considerations, in which older people have the leisure of time, as well as the desire to relax and enjoy countryside views and the conviviality of meeting others on the bus. In essence, it appeared that a significant feature of the instrumental transport choices made concerned not so much the factual availability of transport but its “goodness of fit” with its convenience and pleasure: life was considered too short to excessively disrupt a “sense of flow” when making the effort to go places.

Virtual mobility: This meaning of mobility refers to how the purposes of mobility are achieved in an alternative way without significant personal literal movement, either through others or through technology. The variations of virtual mobility refer to a) new and emerging technologies and b) help from others in which the “outside world” comes in. Technology that affords virtual mobility includes the use of the internet, *Skype*, and webcam to facilitate contact, mostly with family, as an alternative to achieving personal contact through travel and literal mobility: “We have got a web cam so we use the internet and she (grandchild) phones us and we phone back twice a week.” Land line and mobile telephones are also used for this purpose, mostly with family. Internet shopping, in which both essential supplies (food), as well as specialist goods were purchased, were considered to be a valuable alternative to literal shopping. A couple who adjusted quickly to rural living partly because they were helped through internet shopping commented: “There are no shops other than the farm shop. We do quite a lot on the net. It helps you get on and not do too much. We can have food and stuff delivered.” Another form of virtual mobility refers to help from others. Here, friends, neighbours, professional carers, and services such as meals on wheels, were all cited as ways in which “the outside world comes in” as an alternative to the need to travel for “want to” activities and “have to” activities. Virtual mobility in both its guises, as technological aid and interpersonal aid, were highly valued, not just as essential to people with ill health, but often preferred because of its relative lack of cost and *reach* as balanced against the perceived inconvenience of literal travel.

Imaginative mobility: This meaning of mobility refers to how mobility is achieved in an alternative way without literally moving *by psychological means* through imaginative activities that provide a sense of meaningful spatial engagement, and which achieves a similar psychological outcome to that which would have been achieved through literal movement. This can at times be spontaneous, and at other times, can manifest as “intentional” or planned for. This form of mobility, as an alternative to literal mobility, is particularly valued by older people whose potentials for both literal mobility and virtual mobility recede (either due to increasing physical limitations, ill health, or lack of desire).

The variations consist of any ways in which people extend their sense of connectedness to, and meaningful engagement with, life activities that were previously addressed by literal mobility. This does not involve a simple replacement of the “old” established activity (e.g. “going to the pub to meet longstanding friends”) but rather involves something that is more complex that we found evidence for, that is, the achievement of a different but allied experience through other means (e.g. reminiscing about longstanding friends and stories with visitors and through photographs). Other descriptions of experience that indicated imaginative mobility included the “portals” of television and reading, listening to and playing music, being in close proximity and caring for pets and wildlife, access to views of the landscape, close proximity to nature, gardens, and responding experientially to the changes and rhythms of the seasons. These portals to imaginative mobility were found to be significant aids by which, as an older person’s literal mobility possibilities receded, imaginative pathways were opened up to either a life that is possible or a life that was being held onto. One older woman confined to one room has found a fulfilling alternative to literal movement by imaginatively listening to music and engaging the scenes that it conjures up from the past: “its something I knew a long time ago — dancing and the happy times then, ...the music takes me back there.” An older housebound woman who has always been interested in astronomy commented: “since a little girl I always looked at the moon...I have got a telescope, I looked out the other night, you can’t miss to see Venus...it’s the brightest of the stars.” She went on to explain: “I love watching the sunsets, by next month it will be rising over there, then it will be over there...and I like looking at that.”

This is an important “quality of life” alternative to that which was previously achieved by literal mobility and therefore needs to be considered as part of the spectrum of spatial mobility engagement. This form of mobility meets an intrinsic desire in people to feel that they are moving forward in some sense and are connected to their possibilities.

Potential mobility: This meaning of mobility refers to a situation where the potential to travel is literally available but this availability is sufficient as a fulfilling experience without having to move. Potential mobility thus has characteristics of literal mobility as well as imaginative mobility but combines these in a unique way: the possibility of literal mobility is the foundation for potential mobility but is not actualised; it is not actualised because the mere experience of knowing that it is literally possible is enough of a fulfilling experience, and this fulfilling experience has an imaginative quality. Variations of potential mobility concern a range of mobility choices that are possible but not taken, such as “a trip to the coast or far away.” For example, a couple who did not have plans to go anywhere far, explained that they had plans to go to a seaside resort sometime in the future, but it was enough fulfilment for them to feel the potential mobility of this as an option: “It’s not a must-do, it’s just a feeling that it could be nice to explore a bit more of Cornwall.”

We would like to acknowledge that these four kinds of spatial mobility and its variations may be common to all people whether in rural situations or not. However our data and analysis points to two important considerations about becoming older and about rural habitat that signifies something distinctive: a) for older people, virtual, imaginative and potential mobility become significantly more important as alternatives to literal mobility either because of health reasons or because their motivations for movement become reprioritised, b) the older people living in a rural habitat evaluate their motivated engagements with spatial mobility in terms of a value of convenience in relation to the specific desire to “dwell” in their “homelike” rural environment.

b) Rural living as a portal to well-being in older people.

As described in the phenomenon: *the meaning of mobility*, the older people in our study painted a picture of how the traverse of space in various aspects of their lives was important to them. They described everyday life in “moving around” terms, how they used transport and the mobility opportunities available. But more than this, they included descriptions of what was important to them in sustaining their quality of life: they spoke of the places that they *needed* to go to as well as the places that they *desired* to go to, and how they achieved the purpose and outcomes of mobility without always literally traversing space. But also, they spoke about rural life, the significance of place, the significance of nature, and the significance of heritage connections. They described a temporal rhythm and how they personally fitted into all of this. This included thoughts they had about getting older, their values and how their values had changed, and how the landscape and nature were significant for their experience of well-being. In our presence to all of this, what appeared to announce itself, was that a particular kind of well-being in relation to rural place was a significant enough phenomenon in its own right, and that this called for deeper analysis and articulation. We now articulate this phenomenon that we call: *rural living as a portal to well-being in older people*.

Essential Structure of the Phenomenon: Rural Living as a Portal to Well-being in Older People.

A certain kind of well-being related to rural place emerged as an essential phenomenon. This connection between well-being and rural place was constituted by two interrelated experiences: the importance of dwelling and slowing down at this stage of our participants’ lives; and the importance of a “rich textured locale” for the well-being of rural older people.

1) The importance of dwelling and slowing down

There were notable findings that suggested an increased interest in what we are calling “dwelling” as an emphasis. The term “dwelling” refers to an overall “willingness to be here” and even an increasing preference for a kind of less active life style that is nourished by a sense of “at-homeness” within the rural landscape. Related experiences expressed in this connection were those of a preference for peace, privacy, beautiful natural views, “being in nature,” being far from the crowd, and generally a life that reflects less goal-oriented “being there.” When literal mobility opportunities recede there is often less of a sense of regret because of the welcome emphasis on “at-homeness.” It is in this context that both virtual mobility and imaginative mobility become important alternatives to literal mobility as well-being resources. There were two variations that constituted the motivation to dwell and slow down; we have called these: “prompted to dwell” and “choice to dwell.” Being prompted to dwell refers to situations in which a person’s life circumstances, such as ill health or carer responsibilities resulted in a prompt to reconsider their life’s priorities, and how a slower life may be easier for them. In this regard one man said: “we wanted a bit more peace because I had cancer.” A person who cares for his wife commented: “In my life as a carer my home is very important. I can’t imagine living in my previous situation. It would be quite claustrophobic.” He now enjoys the open vistas of the forest and rhododendrons, the typical old English countryside, and the wilderness there, “particularly at night time.” The variation that we have called “choice to dwell” refers to situations in which there is more freedom to consider their life’s priorities, often accompanied by fulfilment in being close to the natural world. But often, new developmental stages brought on by ageing (such as retirement) may result in the wish for a simpler, more peaceful life. An example is given by a man who

decided to move to a more rural situation because of the desire for greater peace: “I go and sit out there and you know...nobody, no sirens and things like cars. I sit out there – there is a little summer house – [I go there] especially in the Spring or Autumn when it is not hot.” Another woman indicated: “it’s nice listening to the birds and seeing all the trees and the flowers come out, and all that and looking at the sky and the sun coming up or going down.” Further, a couple who knew very well what is in a thirty mile radius of their home, and whose garden is very important to them said: “It’s like being on your own world, nothing we actually need... and we have the roses.”

2) The importance of a rich textured locale for the well-being of rural older people

There were notable findings that suggested an intimate knowledge and valuing of their local rural vicinity as a “storied” place that was rich with personal, communal and landscaped history, and which gave the immediate locale “a human face.” The well-being possibilities of this textured locale generally begins outside the front door and its horizon stretches to include places necessary for day to day requirements (such as post office, doctors surgery, local shop), as well as places that are important for older peoples’ sense of enjoyment usually related to their preference for rural living (such as garden centres, heritage sites, coastal walks, and familiar places that have personal historical significance for them). An older woman who can’t go out because of illness spoke of all the places nearby that are full of stories for her: “...like the goat who used to live down there... she would not let women into the field... but a man could go into the garden...the goat would not eat anything else but if panties were on the line she would pinch them.” She also spoke about various places that have changed in meaning over time: “The canals remind me of the past, we had no money. If we could not catch a rabbit, or the hens didn’t lay, we did not have enough food...we had no money but we so enjoyed everything here.” Another woman, also housebound talked of how she sits outside and can imagine what it is like further afield: “there is a dingle down there and there is a tunnel up the other end and there is a tunnel of trees.” She loves the trees. The cherry tree reminds her of the man with the sheep dog and the times when she went wandering in the woods. A man spoke of how he had got to know this landscape he lived in through a long history of having moved through it: “I have travelled all the country lanes and everywhere.” He knows all the places where the forest has receded and when. The notion of the richness of “textured locale” is epitomised by a comment from one of our interviewees. An older man was visited by his grand daughter in the rural countryside. She looked around and exclaimed “Grand dad, you live in the middle of nowhere!” To which he replied, “No, I live in the middle of everywhere.”

When literal mobility opportunities recede there is often a need to draw on their knowledge of this textured locale and the mobility resources offered within this locale. The importance of a rich textured locale for well-being has within it a number of different nuances that emerged from our analysis of elders who’ve grown up and lived in the area all their lives, and those elders who had moved into the area, often to retire. There are some important distinctions between these elders: Long-standing elders of the area particularly valued the depth of *this* storied place in which they had participated in for a lifetime; they were aware of the story of the place that preceded them but had also built up over time a rich personal history that arose out of their living there through the seasons and the changes. The following quote is from an older man who had seen his grandchildren grow up there, who has been to many weddings and funerals, and who has a community of friends and farmers who are connected to his past work life:

“I am part of the community because I get things done...I planted a tree that will be there for another 100 years...I am chasing my ancestors at the moment who lived not really far away. Most of them were born ten miles away...so the family name will go on...”

Those elders who had moved into the area also shared some sense of this historical connection to the place, but with two variations:

a) This group generally came to the rural place because of their desire and/ or need to slow down. For example a couple moved from London about 10 years ago and now live in a rural parish of 400 people: “after London we came here for a better life. We felt we were getting the rush, the hub bub.” Another gentleman commented: “Our dream was the rural living... in the country you get four distinct seasons, you know, ... you get the Winter.”

b) This group were also often attracted to a particular place because of a past historical significance that was personally meaningful to them. For one couple a personal – historical connection to the area was important. They referred to their personal connection to the area by saying: “This old house, a ruin really. I have known it since a toddler and we go there regularly...we have always loved it, and there is a fountain which is fantastic to see.”

The Rhythms Around Us: Well-being Wisdom from Rural Elders

We believe that there are some unanticipated implications of our study for understanding the nature of well-being. The rural elders in our study confirmed some of the emphases of the dwelling-mobility theory of well-being (Todres & Galvin, 2010) in that the experience of “at homeness” or “dwelling” is central to experiential well-being. We cannot, in this paper, present all the complexities of our theory of well-being, and refer readers to the citation above. However, we would just like to briefly indicate the sense in which we link “at homeness” and dwelling to the phenomenon of well-being. Following Heidegger’s later work (Heidegger, 1971; 1993) and Mugerauer’s (2008) interpretation, we presented an argument which linked Heidegger’s later considerations on “*wohnen*” (to reside, to stay) with the idea of “dwelling at peace.” The possibility of “peace” in Heidegger’s later writings thus became an important counterpoint to his earlier notion of “possibility” (which we have characterised as existential mobility). Thus our dwelling-mobility theory of well-being focuses on the potential harmony of peace and possibility. The rural elders in our study appeared to confirm how well-being refers to both “mobility” and to “dwelling.” But these rural elders provided two particularly important insights: a) that a ‘storied’ connection to our natural world and its rhythms may be just as important for well-being as the social or bodily conditions for well-being b) that in our present culture the value of mobility as a source of well-being may have been overemphasised, and that the value of dwelling for well-being may have been obscured.

a) The storied connection to our natural world as a resource for well-being

Rural elders in this phenomenological study all independently and spontaneously spoke of the richness of their “rural place” as a source of “at homeness,” dwelling and well-being. We were moved to call this dimension of their “living in” and “living with” these personal rhythms of the natural world, “textured locale.” “Textured locale” clearly announced itself as a crucial “portal” or pathway to well-being. Such rural places thus emerged as a liminal space that connected personal meanings to a natural world that is before and beyond them; such meaningful places were not just “spatial” but temporal as well; they were always “wet

through” with history and heritage. At its depths this connectivity was not separate from what well-being could be: an intimate continuity between self and broader “natural” ecological contexts that speak with a “human face.” This phenomenon that we called *rural living as a portal to well-being in older people* has some resonance with some anthropological descriptions of traditional societies’ embeddedness in what they call “an envioning earth” and a participatory “place centred” living (Abram, 1996). Such anthropological and ecological perspectives often include arguments about how older people in these ancient cultures had a crucial and respected role to play in connecting people to their past and to “textured locales” that supported them. In our current and modern day study we thus heard our rural elders calling us back from a decontextualized discourse about environment and mobility needs to a well-being discourse in which “at homeness” did not appear to be separate from the rural rhythms of place. And in our view, it is not a matter of chance that it is older people that are well placed to remind us of the importance of “at-homeness.”

This message about a sense of place as a resource for well-being is a remedy to much current discourse that over emphasises social inclusion as a source of well-being. Here, we would like to re-emphasise the possibility of our connectivity to the natural world or place as a source of well-being. We wish to do this not because we would like to deny the importance of either the social dimensions of well-being or even its physical bodily dimensions, but because the “place dimension” of well-being (spatial well-being) may be at risk of becoming an obscured perspective. This empirical study thus appears to confirm the relevance of the spatial dimension for well-being, especially when possibilities for some of the other well-being resources are in recession. This is not to say that the other dimensions of well-being such as temporal well-being, interpersonal well-being, embodied well-being, and emotional well-being are not important (Galvin & Todres, 2011) but that this phenomenological study points to findings that emphasise the value of spatial well-being.

b) An overemphasis in our culture on mobility as a source of well-being

If our phenomenological study moved towards an emphasis on dwelling, well-being and textured locale, what are the implications of these findings for our initial aim of understanding the mobility needs of rural elders? Our phenomenological lifeworld orientation resulted in findings that suggested that one cannot understand the meaning of mobility for older people living in rural areas (what was important to them about the need and wish to traverse space) without understanding how this is in play with dwelling (their sense of “at homeness” in their rich textured locale). In other words, the meaning of mobility is intertwined with the meaning of dwelling and cannot be considered alone; the value of feeling at home or otherwise is a crucial context for understanding what mobility means to older people. Dwelling, or the “willingness and ease” of being here, of residing here, of being in a rich textured locale, this rural space with many meanings histories and communal significances, becomes particularly important for the older people in our study. The implication of “an increased interest in dwelling” is that the need for mobility became less important as a primary source of well-being. Life became less goal-oriented. This is not to say that mobility as an option and possibility is unimportant for well-being. But more, that our rural elders were reminding us about a more dialectical phenomenon as a source of well-being, namely the *rhythm* of dwelling and mobility. This reminder about this rhythm made us wonder whether in our current cultural context of fast moving aspirations and targets, mobility as a value is over emphasised, and dwelling as a value may be obscured as a legitimate source of well-being. In our study, the rural elders were speaking about this rhythm in relation to rural life. We wish to acknowledge however that this rhythm of mobility and dwelling can occur in other spatial contexts such as a city (Hillman, 2006). In this study it

was just that living rurally seemed to provide a powerful reminder of the value of dwelling. So, our older people appear to be telling us that we need to honour both dimensions, in play with one another. Therefore, at the end of this study we discovered our participants as mentors who were teaching us about a possible split in our culture. In calling us back to this rhythmical play, and to the well-being intimacies of living within “textured locales,” they have, in our view, brought a potentially healing voice forward from out of the shadows.

Endnotes

¹ Rhizome: ‘seeing rhizomatically’ is a ... “visual metaphor for the intricacy of embodied understanding ...which has been used by Eco, Deleuze and Guattari, and Cunningham to capture the idea of its complex entanglement. A rhizome is the intricate, interconnected root like framework that anchors mosses to surfaces and through which they absorb nourishment” (Polkinghorne, 2004. p. 141).

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