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The Community Life of Older People in Ireland

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Chapter One
Living in Rathmore and Rathbeg: An Introduction

Introduction

This book is an investigation of the lives of older people in Irish society. Based on extensive ethnographic and survey data, the book provides a sociological account of how older people live their lives and make sense of their lives at the start of the twenty-first century. It offers a descriptive account of the everyday lives of older people in different situations and in different settings in both urban and rural locations in Ireland. The book critically examines contemporary ideas about ageing, and in the light of the lived experiences of older people themselves, it provides insights into what a good life can be.

The study revealed that older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg are involved in a dense network of interaction with family, kin, friends and neighbours. Through formal and informal activities involving social and leisure activities, volunteering, informal helping, religious practices and informal sociability older people co-create positive forms of sociality. These activities and interactions are strongly associated with satisfaction, meaning and purpose in life. Face-to-face interactions within localities help to create enclaves of sociality where friendship is fostered.

While the study found high levels of connectedness there were older people who experienced disconnectedness. Some older people had accumulated emotional and material disadvantages owing to poor life chances. Difficulties that can contribute to social isolation and low morale include declining health, reduced mobility, death of spouse or friends, enduring or increasing caring responsibilities, insufficient health and social care supports and reduced income. While sociability and communal supports were evident throughout the study areas, there were areas where a combination of higher levels of stress (due to

problems in families), poorer communal provision and environmental factors (such as vandalism) had contributed to lower levels of satisfaction and engagement with communal life. The study investigated how both connectedness and disconnectedness are experienced by older people, the conditions and processes involved in different forms of sociality and the contribution that older people themselves make to creating positive forms of sociality. Thus key elements of community-ness are identified that are related to a good life for older people in Ireland at the start of the twenty-first century.

Aims and settings

The book provides both empirical and theoretical understandings of the nature of ageing and community in contemporary Irish society. It aims to provide a holistic account of older people's lives – their significant relationships, commitments and social activities. The book is based on a research study carried out between 2000 and 2005 titled 'The Participation of Older People in their Communities'.[1] It examines the social and community participation of older people[2] in two geographical communities in Ireland. Rathmore, an urban area in Dublin, was the primary research site, and Rathbeg, a rural area in the north-west of Ireland was the secondary research site.[3] The primary interest of the study was the participation of older people in their communities – their interactions and social activities and the extent to which these contribute to satisfaction and meaning in later life. The focus of the investigation is on the social and communal activities of older adults including leisure interests, involvement in clubs, religious practice, voluntary work, relationships with kin, friends and neigh-

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1   'The Participation of Older People in their Communities', unpublished PhD study, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2005.

2   A cut-off age of 65 and over was chosen for the purposes of this study since this is the normal retirement age in Ireland.

3   Rathmore and Rathbeg are fictitious names.

bours, help given and help received, use of social services and informal interactions in neighbourhoods and other communal settings. Key themes explored in the study are the importance of friendship, the contribution of older people to the lives of others and people's own understandings of what is a good life.

People grow older in a particular place and we cannot explore either what a full life might mean or processes related to ageing unless we seek to understand the context and setting in which people live their daily lives. Two contrasting geographical locations were chosen to investigate ageing processes in a community context. Rathmore is a large suburb in Dublin, while Rathbeg is a small village in County Donegal. The study sought to examine both individual patterns of social and communal activities among a diverse group of older adults and to map the landscape of social groupings in Rathmore and Rathbeg. A multi-method research strategy was employed, including the use of ethnography, survey and interviews. Different approaches were used at different stages of the research that aimed to provide understanding of older people's lives in the context of their relationships and commitments. By combining ethnographic and statistical analyses we were able to obtain a detailed disaggregated picture of how older people live in their communities, to explain patterns of connectedness and disconnectedness among a diverse population of older adults, and to contribute to theoretical understandings of processes related to ageing and community. We were thus able to map the significant social groupings in Rathmore and Rathbeg, to delineate the relationships of sociability and support involving family, kin, friends and neighbours, and to provide rich description of activities and relationships that were meaningful in the lives of older people.

The lives of older people have become subject to greater political and research scrutiny over recent decades in the industrialised West. This is partly the result of socio-demographic forces that have led to a 'greying' of the population and the policy implications that arise from this. It also results from critical stances towards aspects of contemporary culture and a questioning of the assumptions about age which are embedded in our institutions and our practices. Of the different theoretical and empirical approaches in sociology that seek to illuminate the experiences of older people in contemporary society, many

approaches tend to depict lives in very individualistic terms. Others emphasise the influence of cohort and class on experiences of ageing. However, it is the interpersonal aspect of ageing lives and the extent to which meaning and satisfaction in later life are related to communal life which are the focus of this book.

Ireland is often referred to as a post-modern or post-Christian society that has undergone transformation from a traditional society to a modern, industrial and secular one. Such changes are evident in rapid economic growth, the ending of mass voluntary emigration and the arrival in Ireland since the mid-1990s of significant numbers of immigrants. However, the reality of social change is more multi-layered, with elements of past and present co-existing (MacEnri, 2006). This study provides insights into the nature of community in a rapidly changing society and into older people's contributions to their communities. It points to realms of activity that offer genuine meaning and value in older people's lives and explores the meaning of connectedness between them. Thus it portrays a relational landscape which can seem in danger of being ignored in Irish and other contemporary societies. At the start of the twenty-first century this study is a useful baseline against which future changes can be examined.

Older people and community

Our interest in the communal aspects of older people's lives stems from a desire to ask questions about the actuality of older people's lives and the possibilities for older adults to live full lives in respect of both their own personal development and in the ways they might enhance the lives of other people. The types of questions that arise include: What are the lives of older people like in contemporary Irish society? What kinds of interdependencies exist in neighbourhoods and communities? What is the nature of connectedness involving family, kin, friends and neighbours? To what extent are older people in different localities living satisfying lives? How do older people themselves

define a 'good life'? Such questions required us to examine both the nature of ageing and the nature of community. While a broadly humanistic approach is used in the study, it is important to point out that at the outset it was not at all clear to what extent and in what ways communality might be important in understanding the lived experiences of older people. Recognising that ageing is, at least in part, a socially constructed phenomenon, was it possible to obtain insight into people's lives in a way that both retained the individual voices of older people in different situations and with different accumulated life experiences, while at the same time contributing to theoretical understanding of the nature of sociality and connectedness in contemporary society?

It was hardly surprising that different experiences and perspectives were found among the participants of the study in relation to questions of social and communal participation. This is illustrated by the example of contrasting pictures presented by two study participants in Rathmore of the social and communal engagement of other older people in their immediate locality. One person painted a picture of contented lives among the fellow residents of a sheltered housing complex:

> They all seem to be happy doing their own thing. They keep the place tidy and go where they want … There are social activities at [name of day centre] if they want. At night time you don't want to go out. I talk to them all. They all seem to be happy, well dressed and keep themselves well (Interview with study participant, Rathmore, July 02).

A less positive picture of older people's lives in Rathmore was presented by another informant who was socially active herself, but believed that there was a lot of isolation and boredom in the lives of older people:

> There's a huge amount of idleness and hanging around among older people … an attitude of 'Ah sure, I'm past it … what would you want to get that done for?' People are living more separately … there's isolation with age … no structure to your day (Interview with study participant, Rathmore, April 02).

With contrasting perspectives such as these, based on different life experiences, life circumstances and experiences of sociability, there

were clear challenges in attempting to develop sensitive and nuanced concepts related to communality and in proposing explanatory models of connectedness that described and explained the experiences of a diverse group of older people who participated in their communities in different ways.

The evolution of the concept of community in the social sciences reflects historical changes in social relations, different moral and value stances and dilemmas in relation to the human condition, such as the need for both constancy and support of a community as well as the desire for personal development and social change. The Donegal poet, Cathal O'Searcaigh, writing about his native place, weaves together the themes of interconnectedness, communal constraints and openness to others found in a small-scale rural community. In the tight-knit 'pobal'[4] of Caiseal na gCorr there is no sharp differentiation between personal choice and relationships and public interactions. O'Searcaigh sees this type of community as characterised by openness and kindness among people:

> It was of course a valley of squinting windows. An obsessive inquisitiveness about each other made people peep and snoop and eavesdrop. This sort of community was, and still is, like a spider's web. Everything and everybody is intimately interconnected. If you seriously transgress, let's say, by pulling a thread here, the jerk of that misdeed, the knock of that offence, will reverberate throughout the entire community network … the *pobal* sets standards of conduct, models of behaviour, certain yardsticks that outline acceptable actions and attitudes. If you are born and reared here, you understand all of this instinctively. It's in the air. It gets transmitted to you anyway, by some subtle social osmosis. Despite the fact that we have become more affluent in recent years, there is still a strong sense of community here in the glen. I have always noticed that when people become well off they demand the privileges of privacy. They become withdrawn. They migrate to their own private inner spaces. This can endanger the sort of open, fluid, sinuous style of interaction that we have practised in the Glen for many a generation. May a door of kindness be always open in our hearts (Voster and O'Searcaigh, 2003: 53).

The theme of kindness and community was strongly expressed in a speech by President Mary McAleese, Uachtarán na h-Éireann to the

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4   People or community.

Conference of Religious in Ireland (Address by the President, June, 2005). She extolled the work of religious and voluntary groups as an expression of connectedness and what she termed 'the human infrastructure we offer each other through friendship and community solidarity.' Her view of community is 'a two-way traffic of decency and goodness.' She suggested that as a nation 'we are good at connectedness, that 'teangmhail', that human spark which spreads from one of us to the whole community.' However, echoing concerns by writers such as Robert Putnam about decline in 'social capital', she also suggested that community needs to be recreated in each generation and that 'it would be sad if in winning our prosperity we lost our time for one another.'

Yet, to what extent are the above visions of caring and cohesive communities expressive of the *idea* of community rather than descriptive of the *reality* of modern, urban communities, especially in the face of rapid social and economic changes? The so-called communitarian crisis has been articulated by writers such as Putnam, Etzioni and Fukuyama who have expressed concern that the old bulwarks of community – class, kinship and neighbourhood – are disappearing. The idea of older people as the 'roots' of communities – key elements of solidarity and continuity in a changing world – has been challenged by 'modern' retirees who enjoy the possibilities of choosing an alternative place and style of retirement (Gilleard and Higgs, 2005). While we might assume that communities of propinquity are more salient in the lives of older people than younger adults, it is far from clear how communality is influenced by place as opposed to common interests or common identity.

Concepts and themes

Theoretical concepts that seemed useful in understanding the meaning of lived experiences included the concept of the life course that views the latter stages of the life course as a dynamic process linked both

biographically and historically with earlier life stages (Hareven, 1996). Such perspectives as well as those from political economy (Estes, 1979; Walker, 1981; Townsend, 1981; Phillipson, 1982, 1998; Estes *et al.*, 2003) help us to understand the socio-cultural and the socio-economic factors that influence the possibility to become one kind of person in old age more easily than another. Humanistic perspectives give insight into what might constitute a good life in old age and to express the potential for human beings to continue to develop and to contribute positively in their older years (Erikson, 1980, Erikson *et al.*, 1986; Moody, 1988, 1998).

Research interest in the lives of older people in Ireland has been growing. Much recent research has been of an applied nature focusing on aspects of the quality of life including health, social care supports and wellbeing of older people both in their homes and those living in long-stay care (Garavan *et al.*, 2001, Murphy, 2006, Age and Opportunity, 2003). However, a criticism of empirical approaches to measuring adjustment and wellbeing is that they do not take account of the social context of lives and develop rather static indicators of processes that are complex and to portray the older person as a rather passive possessor of certain attributes (or recipient of social goods). What has received less attention is any investigation of the nature of connectedness and the intersubjective experiences of older people in a particular place. This calls for a more relational level of analysis and is often a missing ingredient in accounts of individual adjustment to old age or of the broad social forces that provide the context for ageing.

These theoretical approaches guided the design of the study. However, the theoretical perspectives that directed us what to look for and how to interpret what we saw evolved in a dialectical relationship between analytical concepts in the sociological literature and the views and ideas actually used by people who lived in the study areas. Therefore, the meaning of community itself became the key analytical idea throughout the study, aspects of which were subject to critical analysis and examined in relation to how they appeared to resonate with the empirical data. Drawing on classical accounts of community by writers such as Tonnies and more contemporary accounts of the nature of sociality in contemporary capitalist, globalised societies, we

examine concepts such as kinship, social network and neighbouring. The concept of friendship emerged as a key analytical idea that helped to explain the significance of relations in socio-spatial settings and the types of experiences that give meaning to older people's lives. A particular conceptualisation of friendship is proposed arising out of the study that challenges some contemporary accounts of friendship in modern capitalist societies

Methods of inquiry

Our desire to investigate the interdependencies and reciprocities that existed within two localities and to both describe and understand the different types of connectedness and disconnectedness among different groupings of older people required a methodological approach that was drawn from a number of different traditions and that developed throughout the duration of the study. There are particular methodological challenges involved in research on older people when trying to understand processes of life-course construction. Furthermore, no piece of research can claim to fully understand all aspects of a phenomenon and researchers can only do their best with the theoretical and methodological tools available and within the resource constraints of a particular study.

Nonetheless, it seems doubtful that a researcher could come close to understanding the meaning of social and cultural practices of older people or older people's responses to questions about their daily lives without taking into account the following:

1. Biological and historical circumstances of earlier stages of the life course,
2. A referent community, in some sense of the term to be investigated further,
3. Communicative forms used by older people themselves, and
4. Institutional practices as sites of power and influence.

Thus we see value in theoretical approaches that adopt a life course perspective, that view older adults as creators of their own lives in interaction with others with whom they share life space, but at the same time recognise the societal constraints and cultural assumptions that shape possibilities for various types of action and participation. The diversity of the population making up the 'third age' and the 'fourth age'[5] and the nature of the questions to be asked suggested that the study should seek both breadth and depth. For this reason a multi-method research strategy was employed involving both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. In this way it was hoped to capture older people's own experiences in Rathmore and Rathbeg while trying to obtain broadly generalisable knowledge about patterns of participation across different groupings in these localities.

Recognising the importance of the links between emergent theoretical positions and the way many of the key variables used in research on ageing are defined and measured, the value of using a combination of methodological approaches as well as analytical approaches derived from grounded theory was suggested. Our approach to developing methodology was, therefore, to see it evolving as part of the process of research and part of the research problem itself i.e. how to understand the experiences and meaning of ageing for a diverse group of older adults. Thus, the research process, derived from grounded theory, involved continuous formulation and reformulation of concepts in an ongoing dialectical relationship between the ideas and views of older people and the analytical concepts. This approach underlined the premise that both researcher and researched were to some extent involved in the creation of knowledge.

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5   The Third Age has been suggested as marking the period when an individual has retired from formal work but is physically and mentally active and able to engage in active leisure. The Fourth Age is a stage of final illness and/or dependency leading to death.

Methods used

The principal methods used in the study were:

1. An interview-based survey was conducted with one hundred and sixty five older people in Rathmore. The interviewers called to houses on a random basis and steps were taken to ensure that a quota of older people from all the principal sociological categories was obtained (for example, age, class, gender, neighbourhood, living alone or co-resident and type of accommodation). A small comparative survey was carried out in Rathbeg involving interviews with eight older people.
2. Ethnographic work was carried out in a range of settings in Rathmore and Rathbeg including Senior Citizens' clubs, Active Retirement Associations, day centres, voluntary groups, special interest groups and communal settings such as pubs, churches and social centres. This involved observations and informal interviews with participants, organisers and staff. Observations became more focused as theoretical themes emerged.
3. Interviews were carried out with key informants including social services and health care staff, volunteers, members of clubs, religious leaders and community activists.

Choosing the research sites

Rathmore

Rathmore in Dublin was the primary site chosen for the study and Rathbeg in County Donegal was the secondary site. Rathmore was chosen as the primary study area for a number of reasons but the following four considerations were paramount:

1. It contained large numbers of older adults,
2. It was relatively socially mixed,
3. The researcher had some prior knowledge of the area, and
4. Its boundaries correspond with official administrative boundaries for which demographic data is available.

Rathmore is not a natural community in a geographic sense nor would people living within its boundaries regard those boundaries as significant. We sought a locality which had a higher than average proportion of older people, relatively long-established households, a social class mix, some sheltered housing for older adults and a range of services and activities that are used by older people such as clubs, day centres, pubs, churches and leisure amenities. The study area chosen, Rathmore, about four miles north-east from Dublin's city centre, is composed of four adjoining District Electoral Divisions. The District Electoral Division is the smallest administrative unit for which population statistics are available, therefore, the search for a suitable site started off by examining Small Area Population statistics (SAPS) from the most recent census in 1996.

Rathmore's population size (12,700 persons), suburban features (large housing estates with amenities of public transport, public parks and services) and area (about 4 square miles) made it both suitable and practical for carrying out ethnographic and survey type research. Of the total population, 2,483 or 19.55 per cent were aged 65 or older. (SAPS, Census 1996). In the 1996 census 11.5 per cent of the national population was over 65 years. While there is no such thing as a typical community, it was not desirable that the study area should be identifiably untypical compared with other communities. We believed that the more heterogeneous the area in terms of different household compositions and age groups, different social classes and availability of the most common services, amenities and activities used by older adults the more possibilities there would be to explore all aspects of participation and to specify the conditions under which particular types of participation are likely or not likely to occur. The researcher used personal knowledge, professional contacts with social care and health care staff and visits to the area to ascertain that the area was

indeed a suitable site to investigate processes related to ageing and community.

Sheltered housing

In addition to the general population of older adults living in ordinary housing it was decided to include sheltered housing complexes in Rathmore as a specific site of investigation. It is primarily older adults who live in these complexes since sheltered housing represents a particular public policy response to the accommodation and general social needs of some older people. There is also a sense in which a sheltered housing scheme may be regarded as a form of constructed community. For these reasons it seemed worthwhile to include residents of sheltered housing both as a site where important processes related to ageing and community could be explored and to investigate a particular aspect of public policy towards older adults.

Rathbeg

Rathbeg was chosen as the secondary research site because it provided a contrasting socio-geographical location to the main study area, the author already had relevant knowledge about the area and it was expected that access to key people and settings could be obtained. Rathbeg is situated in County Donegal, a county in the north-west corner of Ireland with a population of approximately 130,000. Rathbeg itself has a population of 812 of whom 118 or 14.5 per cent are aged 65 or over (1996 census). The environs of Rathbeg are rural, consisting of open countryside and other similar sized villages. However, the principal town with a population of 16,000 is only 20 kilometres away. Rathbeg is the birthplace of the author and she spends significant amounts of time there. Therefore, it seemed to provide an opportunity to build on her innate knowledge and connections there to complement the research work in Rathmore. For example opportunities to make observations abounded in the author's own social life when for example at church, in the pub, at funerals, visiting friends

and neighbours, in shops, attending community events and while out walking. While extensive ethnographic work was carried out in Rathbeg and its environs, the quantitative work was much more limited. The quantitative study in Rathbeg was not designed to replicate the survey in Rathmore or to compare item by item with the results of the Rathmore survey but rather to provide some points of comparison in relation to broad differences and similarities in the lives of older people in an urban and a rural locality.

Stages of the study

Ethnographic work

Extensive ethnographic work was carried out in both areas involving observations in many diverse settings and interviews with older people and key informants. Initially the author chose to visit as many different types of settings as possible and later as the study became progressively focused the settings became more selective. Observations were made in day care centres, sheltered housing complexes, social clubs, active retirement groups, residential nursing homes, voluntary groups, churches, shopping centres, and other settings where older adults socialise. The author drew up lists of groups that were mainly associated with older adults such as Active Retirement groups and Senior Citizens' groups as well as groups that were not necessarily associated with one age group such as Ladies' clubs, community development groups and special interest groups. Useful sources of information were notice boards in churches, shops, social clubs and libraries, parish newsletters, parish directories, community newsletters, and brochures in social services centres. While it was not possible to make contact with all groups in Rathmore the author sought to make contact with at least one group from what appeared to be the main broad categories of social groups in which older people were involved.

Opportunities for participant observation were found at different times during the study. In Rathmore the author attended many different types of social gatherings over the course of the study. The following are examples of some of those activities:

- Helped with the preparation and serving of a meal in a sheltered housing complex.
- Attended three meetings of a church-based group to set up a visiting scheme to lonely older people.
- Participated informally in activities in day care centres, Active Retirement groups (bowling activity, art session, bingo, sing-songs etc), community festival events and social gathering of Ladies clubs.
- Attended meetings of Local Historical societies and community development groups.
- Visited local pubs in the company of an informant to observe and meet regular pub goers.

A parallel process of research activity was initiated involving interactions between the researcher and the 'researched' in Rathbeg. Similar methods to those used in Rathmore were employed to identify the significant social groupings in Rathbeg and its environs. The author visited social care settings and conducted interviews with key informants including social services personnel, community activists, voluntary workers and members of clubs. The author spent time in three different day care centres observing the daily routines, interviewing staff and volunteers, engaging in informal dialogue with service users, and taking part in some recreational activities.

Interviews were carried out with older people from different backgrounds that explored their concerns and the significant relationships and commitments in their lives. Interviews were also conducted with key informants who because of their work had knowledge of the lives of older people.[6] Furthermore, some of the informants were

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6   Interviews were conducted with the following key informants: Health and social services personnel, Committee members of several voluntary groups, Local Parish priest, Lay Minister Church of Ireland, Community development worker,

themselves in the older age group. The author monitored local sources of news and events throughout the period of the study and sought out opportunities to inform herself of events and activities and to attend events relevant to the lives of older inhabitants. Events attended included a centenarian birthday celebration, an art exhibition and community festivals – all of which provided insight into communal life and aspects of ageing. Field notes were made after each visit and event. The author's mother, other older relatives and friends were also a great repository of knowledge and insight.

In the case of both Rathmore and Rathbeg, there was a concentrated period of immersion in the initial phase of the study, which gave the author an overview of day-to-day life, knowledge of the relevant institutional settings and of aspects of sociality that appeared important in the lives of older adults. However, interaction with older people and contact with social groups continued throughout the period of the study. Contacts at later stages were directed to specific groups and settings as themes became more progressively focused. These contacts served to obtain feedback from participants, to validate the initial conceptualisation and to give direction to subsequent work and analysis.

Survey

A large-scale survey was carried out in Rathmore and a small survey in Rathbeg. The survey was designed as a creative research instrument that would obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, in order to achieve both a broad overall descriptive understanding of community participation and also deeper understanding of the meanings of different forms of participation and experiences of community. The strategy adopted was to aim to construct a particular type of questionnaire and associated interviewing strategy that involved a dialogue between interviewee and interviewer. While in conventional survey research the interview is seen as a pipeline for the transmission of knowledge,

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Female activist in older persons' community development project, Member of local special interest groups.

here the interview was designed to be more interactional and to pro-
duce more elaborate narratives of people's lives. The questionnaire
contained open-ended questions and recorded the direct words used by
the respondent. Specific steps taken to build rapport with the respond-
ents included sharing information with them on the purposes of the
survey, sensitivity in framing questions and undertakings to give feed-
back on the results of the survey.

Questionnaire

The main Interview Schedule contained 40 questions (See ques-
tionnaire at Appendix A). A variety of different types of questions
were asked including fixed response questions, semi-structured and
open-ended questions. The research themes that emerged from the
initial stages of the research were used to formulate questions in the
following areas:

- Functional interdependencies,
- Patterns of work, leisure and social activities,
- Experiences of retirement,
- Helping relationships in daily living,
- Meaning of community,
- Older adults as a resource,
- Civic engagement,
- Factors related to participation,
- Religion, spirituality and value frameworks,
- General experiences in relation to the role and social partici-
  pation of older people.

Many drafts of the questionnaire were drawn up before it was ready
for testing. Two pilot rounds of interviewing were carried out before
the questionnaire was finalised.
    A section was created in the questionnaire (Part B) to enable the
interviewer to record any impressions they gained of the interviewee.
This was recorded independently by the interviewer when the inter-
view was completed. It was designed to record anything striking or

especially interesting about the respondent which might help in interpreting their answers or which might suggest a theme which could be followed up later.

A Preamble was drawn up which explained the rationale for the survey and gave background details on the research and the researcher. It was used by the interviewers when they first called to the door in their introductory conversation and then given as a handout for the person to keep The Preamble explained the aims of the survey, the topics explored in the questionnaire and the potential benefits of the data acquired. It also indicated that a follow-up meeting would be held to disseminate and discuss the information obtained to which all respondents would be invited. The Preamble was considered an important part of the survey in two respects: firstly, it underlined the social responsibility of the researcher towards the survey participants and the community generally and secondly, it allowed some initiative to the respondent.

Two other short sections were included. Part C of the questionnaire was used to record details of the respondent's accommodation and general surroundings. Part D was used for a short summary of the interviewee, including age, sex and whether living alone or with others. This enabled the researcher to monitor the types of respondents who were being sampled to ensure representativeness.

Sample

The survey was used to locate older people who were living 'ordinary' lives and were neither clients of social services nor necessarily involved in the social groups we had mapped. In the absence of a suitable sampling frame, calling randomly at houses in Rathmore seemed the best way to obtain reliable knowledge about the everyday lives of a heterogeneous grouping of older adults. The sampling strategy adopted represented a mix between purposive sampling and random probability sampling. Thus a sample that was representative as far as possible of the principal subgroups of the general population of older people would facilitate comparison and some degree of generalisation to the wider population. Therefore the aim was to obtain a sample that

would include older adults from all four DEDs,[7] men and women, people from different social classes, younger-old (65–74 years) and older-old (75 years and upwards), people living alone and people who co-resided, residents of sheltered housing and residents of ordinary housing. A sample size of 150 was thought to be sufficient to capture diversity and enable comparisons to be made between subgroups in a statistically meaningful way. Based on the Small Area Population statistics, we established quotas as a broad guide to check whether any group was significantly under or over represented. Over a three week period in summer 2002 the interviewers (including the author who conducted a sizeable number of the interviews) were deployed to call at houses (initially every 3rd or 4th house) and seek an interview with any household member who was aged 65 or over.

Sampling of the residents of sheltered housing was conducted in a different way. In consultation with the Community Liaison Officers with responsibility for the complexes, interviews were arranged in advance as some of the residents might be fearful and suspicious if an interviewer about whom they had no prior knowledge called to their home.[8]

Over a period of three weeks one hundred and sixty five interviews were obtained altogether. This was considered very satisfactory for purposes of generalisability and, insofar as the quota guidelines were concerned, the sample contained a good 'mix' of respondents. There were almost equal numbers of young elderly and older elderly. In relation to gender, 45 per cent of the sample was male while 55 per cent was female. Those living alone were over represented somewhat, however, this was largely accounted for by the inclusion of 18 residents of sheltered housing, all of whom lived alone. The sample was reasonably representative with regard to marital status and socio-economic diversity. While the largest proportion of interviews was

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7   Rathmore consists of four District Electoral Divisions.
8   The author specified the number and 'type' of resident she wished to interview – 18 persons altogether, six residents in each of the three complexes. The Liaison Officers assisted with the selection from each complex of a younger (64–74) female and younger male, an older (75+) female and older male, and a male and female user of health and social services.

obtained in two of the DEDs, one of these DEDs contained more middle class neighbourhoods and the other more working class neighbourhoods, thus ensuring a social class mix of respondents.

Survey in Rathbeg

The quantitative study in Rathbeg was not designed to replicate the survey in Rathmore or to compare item by item with the results of the Rathmore survey but rather to provide some points of comparison in relation to broad differences and similarities in the lives of older people in an urban and a rural locality. Interviews were conducted with eight older residents of Rathbeg using the same questionnaire instrument. The sample was purposive and interviewees were selected on the basis of similar criteria used to obtain a diverse sample in Rathmore – gender, social class background, age and whether living alone or co-residing. The author conducted all the interviews herself in the respondents' own homes. Given the author's familiarity with Rathbeg all the interviewees were known to her. The researcher felt somewhat uncomfortable asking certain questions of people she knew such as those related to help received from and contact with family and relatives. She stressed in advance that the respondent should not feel obliged to answer any question that he or she was unhappy about. In the event no respondent declined to answer any question although one person was anxious for reassurances that what was said should in no way identify that respondent. Because of the small size of the sample and the possibility of being able to identify the respondents it was decided not to offer feedback. Furthermore, very scant details are given of the eight interviewees to protect their anonymity in a small locality.

Engaging with respondents and establishing trust

We consciously set out to use the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee to obtain reliable knowledge that would bring the interviewer into the interviewee's world. At the same time we were conscious of our ethical obligation to inform and to ensure insofar as

we could that the experience would be enjoyable for both parties. We were also concerned that we should give something back to those who took part. The principal ways we sought to achieve these aims were:

- Training the interviewers,
- Drawing up a written protocol to ensure the interviews were conducted in a sensitive and honest way,
- Ensuring that the questions were appropriate and sensitively asked,
- Giving information prior to the commencement of the survey,
- Preparing a handout on the purposes of the survey, and
- Giving an undertaking to arrange a meeting after the survey to give feedback on the results.

The fieldwork experience was very positive in regard to responses to the requests for interview, the quality of the interviews obtained, the reported nature of the interactions between interviewer and interviewee and the hospitality that many of the interviewees displayed to the interviewers.

Living in Rathmore

History

Rathmore was originally a rural village with ancient origins. It is thought to have been an important settlement in Viking Ireland in the 11th century. The history of Rathmore has been recorded by the local Historical Society in a number of publications. The common name associated with Rathmore is derived from the Gaelic and is believed to relate to an Irish saint from the early Christian period in Ireland. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries Rathmore was a very rural area comprising large private estates, small farms and labourers' cottages. Many

of the 'Big Houses' were occupied by families who were prominent in the social, economic and political life of the country. Many of these old houses are still there and are being used for example as a school, a hospital and a retirement home. The remaining 18th and 19th century houses, the railway station and Church of Ireland church which were built in the 19th century, and other remains of older buildings, create a village-like atmosphere in this part of Rathmore. Rathmore remained largely unchanged until the spread of Dublin city in the 1950s.

Rathmore today

The area of Rathmore is today dominated by suburban housing estates. New housing built in the 1950s and 1960s, both public and private, brought many young couples and families into the area. Many of the older adults have lived in the same house which they first occupied forty or fifty years previously. The vast majority of respondents in the survey have lived in Rathmore for at least 30 years and in almost all cases in the same house – over 80 per cent had lived in the locality for at least 30 years and 46 per cent for at least 40 years.

Rathmore can be described as a settled mixed social class area, comprising mainly lower-middle and upper-working class groups. There is no industry located there apart from service employment, however, there are small industrial estates in its environs. All the major occupational groupings are to be found there.

The shopping/commercial area still retains village-like features, including the remains of historical buildings and monuments, old houses and a railway station. While Rathmore is now entirely built up, a large mature public park with pleasant walkways and magnificent trees and shrubs adjoins one part of it and at the nearest point Dublin Bay and its sandy beaches is only a quarter of a mile away. Some streets adjacent to the oldest part of Rathmore or adjoining the large public park are surrounded by trees. The large local-authority-built estates are generally in open spaces with few trees.

Housing

Local authority housing estates were built in different phases approximately between 1954–1965. Private housing estates in Rathmore were developed mainly during the 1950s and 1960s. While the private houses tended to be built nearer the main roads and closer to the village centres, the local authority estates were generally built in the large green spaces in between. Practically all the local authority housing in Rathmore has been purchased under Tenant Purchase schemes and is now owner-occupied. There have been some new small private housing developments in more recent decades and a few apartment complexes built as remaining pieces of land have been developed. The generally well-maintained houses and gardens indicate a reasonable degree of material comfort and ability by residents of both public and private housing to manage the up-keep of their homes. The private houses tend to be bigger and to have more spacious gardens than the houses built by the local authorities.

Families who moved to Rathmore in the 1950s and 1960s as young adults in their 20s are now in their 60s and 70s and their children are well into their adulthood. Many respondents recalled moving in to their houses on marriage or when their children were very young. Many houses have gone up for sale in recent years, particularly in the areas with the oldest housing and which have higher proportions of older people. Priests in the area say they have a large number of funerals. With the current high property values prevailing in Ireland the price of both local authority and privately built houses has soared in recent years.

Sheltered housing

There are three sheltered housing complexes in Rathmore which were built by Dublin City Council between 1968 and 1977 with approximately 50 to 60 units in each. The units are allocated under a scheme

of Priority for Letting.[9] The age limit for entitlement to sheltered housing used to be 60 years but this was recently reduced to 55, bringing a somewhat younger age group into the courts. The units in Rathmore are all bedsits (apart from a few double units for married couples) and the accommodation consists of a living room/bedroom, a small kitchenette and a bathroom. The units are very small, approximately 180 sq. ft., and the absence of a separate bedroom is a major drawback for many of the residents. There are Housing Liaison Officers (formerly known as Wardens) employed by Dublin City Council to provide what the Council literature terms a 'good neighbour' service to the residents.

Amenities and facilities

Rathmore has a large public park with walk-ways, football pitches, pitch-and-put and tennis courts. Rathmore is generally well served by public transport – there are scheduled routes served by Dublin Bus and two DART train stations (light electric train service). Other amenities in the area include schools, library, sports clubs and a swimming pool. There are a variety of clubs and formal groups in Rathmore, including social clubs, special interest groups and church-related groups. Clubs meet in parish and community halls. Groups that cater specifically for older people are Senior Citizens' groups and Active Retirement groups. Pubs are also an important venue for older people, especially older men. Older people can be observed in public places in Rathmore using public amenities, attending church services, on the buses, in local shops and post offices and participating in club activities. There are four Catholic churches in Rathmore serving a predominantly Catholic population. The Protestant community served by two churches represents a very small proportion of the population. In relation to social care type facilities Rathmore has one Day Care

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9   Units are currently allocated from four lists: medical grounds, homeless status, buy backs (a scheme where the Council buy the applicant's house and allocate them a unit) and the ordinary waiting list (information at meeting with Council official on 21/10/03).

Centre operated by the Health Service Executive (at the time of the study this was the Health Board).There are two long-stay residential homes for older people.

Living in Rathbeg

History

Rathbeg is a small-scale community with a long history and long-established traditions. In Rathbeg, for example, some residents can trace their family connections in the locality back to the late 1700s. There are many examples of settlement of more ancient origins. A local historical society has collected and recorded local history of the twentieth century from photographic, oral and written sources. Preparations to commemorate a major national historical event that took place in Rathbeg were underway while the study was in progress. As in many rural areas in the West of Ireland, emigration of young people to urban parts of Ireland and abroad has been a feature of life in Rathbeg during the 20th century and before.

Rathbeg today

Rathbeg is a scenic seaside village with a farming hinterland whose permanent population increases during the summer months and at other holiday periods. The local community comprises people who have lived in Rathbeg all their lives, people from Rathbeg who worked abroad for part of their lives, typically in England or Scotland, people who grew up elsewhere but chose to live in Rathbeg, perhaps on retirement, people who grew up elsewhere but married and settled in Rathbeg. There is a large 'diaspora' of people born in Rathbeg and living in different parts of the world from the United States to New Zealand. They return regularly to visit their families. Some have

bought second homes in Rathbeg and would regard themselves as belonging to the community by virtue of growing up there, their family and friendship ties and frequent visits. While Rathbeg may be thought of as more self-contained than Rathmore, it has experienced significant social change in both inward and outward movement of people.

There is no major industry in Rathbeg. However, farming is a long-established livelihood of many Rathbeg families. Work has also been available in construction due to tourism and increased second home ownership. The main occupational groupings can be identified in Rathbeg – professionals, proprietors – mainly of small businesses, farmers, white-collar workers who work in offices in nearby towns, manual workers in the fishing and building industry, seasonal hotel workers and casual workers on social employment schemes.

Housing

Most of the housing in Rathbeg is owner occupied, as is usual in the Irish countryside. However, there are two small public housing estates, one built in the 1950s and the second around the year 2000. A small number of houses for 'social housing' were built by a voluntary housing body in 2002. A number of public housing units and voluntary housing units have been specifically allocated for older people. In addition to permanent residences large numbers of holiday homes have been built in recent years. Many of these are second homes owned mainly by people from Northern Ireland who use them at weekends and at holiday times.

Amenities and facilities

Amenities include local walking pathways, safe swimming beaches, a small marina, a football pitch, a nine-hole golf links and a small resource centre. A limited public transport system operates. One bus travels to the principal town early in the morning and returns in the evening. There are four pubs and two hotels. At the time of the study

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there was no community or parish centre, however a community centre has recently been opened. The pubs are used for occasional social events such as table quizzes and fundraising coffee mornings organised by local groups. There are many social groups including church-based groups and groups involved in different aspects of community enterprise and development. There are two main Christian communities in Rathbeg, Catholic and Protestant, the Protestant community being the minority. The Protestant community is further divided into two denominations, Church of Ireland and Presbyterian, each with its own church. There are therefore three churches in Rathbeg. There are two Primary schools and the nearest second level schools are in a town twelve kilometres away. A community hospital in a nearby village provides residential, respite and day care for frail and incapacitated older people in the environs of Rathbeg. There are private nursing homes in the principal towns in the county.

Social change in Rathmore and Rathbeg

While Rathmore and Rathbeg appear to represent opposite ends of the rural-urban continuum we found features of traditional rural living in Rathmore and features associated with urban living in Rathbeg. For example in Rathmore we found religious practices and forms of neighbouring reminiscent of communal traditions in rural Ireland. We also found close long-standing relationships among neighbours who had for example been the first occupants of a new housing estate. In contrast, Rathbeg has experienced many changes that some older residents perceived as 'losses', such as a decline in the traditional cultural practice of neighbours visiting each other. It seemed clear that the significant relationships, interdependencies and commitments that we set out to investigate in Rathmore and Rathbeg would not correspond with simple notions of traditional and urban ways of life. For this reason, it was important to take account of the articulation of social life in both localities with social linkages beyond their boundaries.

Outline of book

Chapter One sets out the aims and rationale of the study. The types of relationships and activities that are the focus of the investigation into the communal lives of older people are explained: these include leisure and social activities, club involvement, religious practices, volunteering, informal helping, involvement in community groups and informal interactions. The chapter gives a flavour of the themes to be explored and the methods used in the study. It describes the two localities chosen to investigate processes related to ageing and community, Rathmore in Dublin and Rathbeg in County Donegal.

Chapter Two explores changing understandings of old age, and ageing in industrialised societies generally, and in Ireland in particular, over recent decades. The chapter examines evidence of generational relations, the social and economic role and cultural attitudes towards older people in Ireland in the past and in recent times. Contemporary social theories on ageing are outlined and compared including political economy, life history, developmental and humanistic theories. A humanistic approach to understanding ageing is the approach adopted in the book and arguments are advanced that ageing must be understood in relation to community. Both traditional and contemporary accounts of community are examined and a critique is made of some theories that focus on personal communities and that eschew the significance of communities of place.

Chapter Three examines the view of the older person contained in social policies in Ireland, the practical effects of policies for the wellbeing of different groups of older people and the extent to which social policies enhance possibilities for continuing personal development and cultural and social integration. The evolution of social policy is traced through key reports from the 1960s to date. Principles that have guided policy including the idea of a continuum of care, 'ageing in place' and healthy ageing are discussed and critiqued. The difficulties that older people experience in day-to-day living are discussed on the basis of accounts given by older people in the two localities. The chapter argues that the services and supports necessary to give

effect to principles of 'ageing in place' have been slow to develop. Nonetheless, examples are given of good locally-based day services that provide a range of supports and opportunities for sociability and creativity.

Chapter Four examines social participation through leisure activities, social clubs and informal sociability. The chapter maps out the most significant social groupings in the lives of older people in Rathmore and in Rathbeg. They include sports groups, social clubs, Active Retirement groups (ARAs), special interest groups, voluntary and community groups and church groups. The leisure activities and interests of older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg are described. Patterns of participation in social and leisure activities are discussed highlighting differences in terms of gender, age, social class and location. The social and personal significance of leisure activities is examined, drawing on theories and concepts related to lifespan development and the Third Age. The overall argument in the chapter is that through communal leisure activities people create social worlds that make life meaningful and worthwhile.

The theme of Chapter Five is the meaning of place in Rathmore and Rathbeg. It explores the respondents' attachment to the places where they live. Settings where meaningful communal engagement takes place are described and the different ways in which connectedness is created are explored. Data is presented on the likes and dislikes of older residents about their community and on their ideas about older people's involvement in their community. Social class and gender differences in relation to the experiences of neighbouring and community are also discussed.

Chapter Six examines volunteering, informal helping and religious practices among older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg. The theme of this chapter is positive neighbouring as an important social resource. The strong ethos of practical help among neighbours is described. Religious practices and the meaning of religion are also explored. Patterns of churchgoing are presented, as well as evidence on the personal and social significance of religious involvement. Activities such as volunteering and informal helping involve creating a more habitable social world, and voluntary and church-based groups play an important role in facilitating this.

Chapter Seven examines the diverse patterns of relationships between groups of older people and their families, kin, friends and neighbours. It also explains the complex ways in which kinship and community can be experienced in the older years. Data is presented to delineate patterns of connectedness, sociability and solidarity in the lives of older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg. From this data it is possible to compare urban and rural experiences, and to examine the experiences of older people who have extensive kin and community relationships as well as those who experience loneliness or social isolation.

In Chapter Eight a model of connectedness is presented based on both qualitative and quantitative data. The model which illustrates how older people live in their communities is supported by theoretical and empirical arguments drawn from the study. Five indicators of connectedness are proposed and a typology of ten relational types is developed. The typology takes account of levels and degree of contact with family, kin, neighbours and friends as well as participation with others in their community through leisure, voluntary work and informal helping. The chapter also discusses factors that are strongly correlated with high and low levels of connectedness.

Chapter Nine explores friendship in socio-spatial settings in general and in the study areas in particular. The types and contexts of friendships in Rathmore and Rathbeg are described. Friendships observed include: one-to-one friendships that are supportive and help people to 'get by'; friendship among neighbours that is often expressed in practical acts of kindness; friendship among members of clubs and social groups that is characterised by sociability and fun; and generalised friendliness that involves acknowledging, greeting and being interested in the lives of others in one's locality. We question ideas about friendship that overemphasise psychological closeness, choice and individuality. We argue that traditional accounts of friendship that stress sociability and moral obligations are closer to the types of friendship we observed among older peole in Rathmore and Rathbeg.

Chapter Ten draws together the evidence on the social integration, community involvement and satisfaction with life among older people in Rathmore and Rathbeg. The study depicts a relational landscape made up of dense interactions and highly meaningful everyday

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activities. We contend that these realms of social activities can seem in danger of being ignored in Ireland at the start of the 21st century. Policy implications discussed here relate to the positive contribution of older people themselves to social and public life and the importance of recognising the natural solidaristic relationships within localities. The chapter revisits the concept of community and proposes that community implies the possibility of rich multi-dimensional relationships, many of which are geographically based. Lastly, we argue that older people are particularly well placed to build up this type of community and to provide its resources to others.