Aging People as Communal Actors: A Case Study in Rural Villages of East Finland

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Abstract
This article discusses the variety of social activities of aging people in a community. The first aim of this study is to explore how to overcome two dichotomies—public–private as spheres of everyday life and third–fourth age—and by overcoming these, to make visible the personal social resources of older people, which are not usually recognized in policy discourses or in social policy research. Second, we ask whether the problem-oriented rhetoric of aging in Finnish social and rural policy can be challenged from the perspective of aging people’s activities. The article analyzes older people as actors of a rural village community and overcomes the two dichotomies mentioned above from the theoretical context of agency. In this research, rural East Finland is a case with which to investigate social relationships between people. We suggest that seniors not only participate in a variety of communal activities but also act in their homes, which are culturally coded as the territory of private life. By “just being there,” people also produce and reproduce rural communities in many ways. This is a form of action that has been largely ignored by policies, policymakers, and social studies.

Keywords
rural village, community, elderly, active seniors, social resource, aging, small agency

Introduction
Finland is one of Western Europe’s most rural countries. Compared with most other EU countries, the area of Finland is large, and the population size is small (5.5 million people in 2011). The distance from the capital city of Helsinki on the south coast to the most north area in Lapland is 1,350 km, a 16-hr trip by car. As in many other EU countries, the process of population concentration to some urban centers is ongoing. Older people in the East and North Finland face quite similar problems as those in the Northern Periphery areas of other EU countries. Access to services is often poor for people without their own cars; in East Finland, the distance to the nearest shop can be close to 100 km and in the northern part, it can be even further. Similar to other rural areas in Europe, in Finland, old people without a car and with weak local networks are in danger of being excluded from services and social relationships and many activities outside their nearest living environment (Davey, 2007; D. Gray, Shaw, & Farrington, 2006). In those circumstances, the social situations of people with or without a car are very different. One of the most important social differences between rural people in remote areas is their travel possibilities (Tedre & Pulkkinen, 2010).

This article is based on a research project in which our interest focused on the life of retired people who remained in, returned to, or moved to rural areas after retirement. In Finland, many older people from remote, sparsely populated countryside municipalities are drawn to urban centers by the promise of better and more public social and health services compared with those that they have access to in remote areas (Tedre & Pulkkinen, 2010). Even if the trend of migration is from rural to urban, there are also flows in the opposite direction. One of the groups moving from urban areas to rural communities is retired people soon after retirement at approximately 60 years of age (Kattilakoski, 2011; Pehkonen, 2009; Stockdale, 2004, 2006).

Phillipson (2000) summarized the way in which the idea of “community” was reassessed within contemporary sociology in the context of urbanization and globalization in the 1990s. In this article, we approach a rural village as a social community. In a sparsely populated country, local villages are quite scattered, without any concentration of population around distinct centers. The number of inhabitants in Finnish villages ranges from a small group of permanent inhabitants to approximately 500 people. During the summer months, the number of inhabitants will increase significantly. Our

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study’s approach to community was ethnographic in the sense that the routines and normal aspects of everyday life were regarded as worthy of consideration as research data; the mundane and the ordinary parts of social life are perceived as interesting, and the holistic approach stresses relationships, connections, and the interdependency among the component parts. We focus on invisible action in homes and informal social networks, but to obtain a holistic picture, we start by introducing the other social activities of senior villagers, often reported in earlier studies concerning active or productive aging.

In comparative studies of welfare states, Finland is usually classified as one of the Scandinavian (Nordic) welfare states in which public services, provided by local authorities, are widely available (Kröger, Anttonen, & Sipilä, 2003). The “rural” question has always been at the top of the state agenda. The Finnish government has implemented regional policies since the 1960s that were specifically designed to prevent regional disparities in wealth services and opportunities. Therefore, differences between urban and rural areas with regard to income and living standards have been quite small in Finland by international comparison. However, currently, the central problems relating to Finland’s rural policy have been identified as aging, loss of population, economic underperformance, environmental degradation, and a decrease in the number of jobs and services available. In rural policy documents, aging is named as one of the main problems of rural areas and the loss of social and health services is perceived as a core problem for older rural people (Tedre & Pulkkinen, 2010). According to Philo (1992), people in rural areas might be “othered” or marginalized through cultural practices in everyday life and particularly through the social construction of identity and symbolic capital in social and lay discourses. In the context of the sustained movement out of rural villages, we search for dimensions of communal action of older villagers by asking whether it is possible to challenge the ways Finnish rural policy identifies older villagers mainly through the individual problems they face in the village or by perceiving them as a non-productive group of the society or rural areas.

In the 1980s, the Swedish social gerontologist Lars Tornstam (1982) introduced the idea of a resource perspective for social gerontology research. He emphasized older people’s importance as a labor force as well as a source of voluntary work. Tornstam structured the arenas of action as follows: market, labor market, neighborhood, policy, and leisure. Later on, concepts such as productive aging (Bass & Caro, 2001; Hinterlong, Morrow-Howell, & Sherraden, 2001; J. S. Jackson, 2001) or third age (Laslett, 1987) included the idea that old people are useful to a society in one way or another. This shows the varieties of activities of elderly people and the positive economic, social, or personal outcomes of those activities. These perspectives have also been criticized (e.g., Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003) because of their links with neo-liberalistic ideas of effectiveness and independent initiative. Furthermore, Laslett’s (1987, 1991) conceptual division into the third and fourth age constructs the age after retirement as a period free for personal achievement to create forms of social collaboration previously unknown. The fourth age, instead, is the age of dependence and decrepitude. Laslett’s dichotomy has been criticized for treating the dependent people of the fourth age as opposite to the independent, active elderly of the third age.

In this article, we ask whether it is possible in the context of rural communities to find social resources of older people that have been unrecognized in earlier studies and in rural policy. First, we will briefly review the literature relating to community, a sense of community, and active agency in the context of the public and private division. Next, we will present the data, analysis, and ethical questions followed by an explanation of the findings and finally a discussion of the study’s outcomes.

Villages as Interactive Communities

This article focuses on retired (60+) people as actors of rural villages. We approach a rural village as a social community that provides interactions between people, nature, and places. A traditional division of communities presented by Tönnies (1992) includes the concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. Warm relationships and harmony among a family and village are characteristic of a Gemeinschaft community. A Gesellschaft community, on the contrary, is founded on egoistic and calculated relationships. According to Lehtonen (1990), Gemeinschaft is a warm caregiving community, whereas a Gesellschaft community is guided by rationality. Furthermore, he states that the interpretation of a Gemeinschaft community is a modern world’s conception of a community projected into pre-modern time in which the negative features of a pre-modern community have been left under the shadow of positive features. In this context, this conception of community can be an interpretation with no substance. Status communities (Gemeinschaft) were connected to a family and relatives, whereas agreement communities (Gesellschaft) were based on the act of agreeing.

For his part, David Conway (1996) stated that a community is any type of a group of individuals that shares a common life or a way of life, completely or partially. It associates a natural value with that shared life or way of life, and is aware that others in the group also associate in the same way. The individuals of a group feel, or tend to feel, pronounced respect for each other and cooperate, or tend to cooperate, with each other to maintain and encourage a shared life or way of life. Conway has taken the family, neighborhood or closest living environment, nation, and state as more precise research subjects of community forms. All of these tend to be valued positively. At the same time, communities can be cruel and harrowing in which different hierarchies compete with each other. Nevertheless, individuals change,
communities change, and the relationships between the members of the communities change all the time. (Murdoch, 2000).

When a community is translated broadly into a group formation, it can be based on economic, political, or regional factors. A common feature may be kinship, interests, beliefs, common actions, interactions, hobbies, and so forth, and communities can be categorized according to their objectives and the nature of their interactions. In communities, there are networks of social relationships that have contents of meaning and values in common, but a community does not necessarily have to be geographically clustered. In other words, a community is formed by bonds between people, the strength of which cannot be standardized. A community may also function as an adhering environment, the fundamental feature of which is support. In this case, a community allows an individual to be weak while providing chances to take action—such that it becomes possible for the individual to confront the things that threaten him or her (e.g., Winnicott, 1986). Common among these definitions and classifications is a demonstrated sense of solidarity (Lehtonen, 1990, 1996) as well as the need to defend a community for it to survive (Bauman, 2002).

Granovetter (1973) divided social networks into continuously maintained “strong bonds” characterized by intensive communication, emotional intensity, and mutual trust, and into “weak bonds” that are more distant and less frequently maintained. Although paradoxical, weak social bonds are nevertheless important from the perspective of social networks’ structural capability to distribute information. Persons with less frequently maintained social relationships move in different fields of society, belong to different social reference groups, and gain information about different things. There are few responsibilities related to weak bonds. At a micro level, weak bonds make the distribution of information easier and, at best, increase the opportunities for cooperation between actors. Weak bonds are important for connecting small groups and channeling the distribution of information. The meaning of strong bonds is connected to commitments between actors. Strong bonds primarily integrate their members into a group, whereas weak bonds integrate individuals into the society. Strong bonds are generally held as important sources of social support in everyday life.

The concept of social support was introduced (e.g., Green, 1993) when explaining the connection between becoming ill and changes in one’s life. Social support has many forms: practical help, appreciation, mental support, and support based on knowledge. A social support provider supports a person in need to a proper extent, as social support can turn against itself if it becomes an experience of social control.

According to Pehkonen (2009), a community expresses its will through, for example, social control, by which it hopes to regulate the behavior of its members. Doing right from the viewpoint of a community can nevertheless entail doing wrong on a personal level. Social pressure and pressures of conformity and hierarchies are strongly linked to rural villages and particularly to a peasant culture. People belong to several communities at the same time (e.g., family, work, study, place of residence, hobbies), each with its own regulations and distribution of work and tasks. In this case, the pressure of community-focused membership is distributed. In general, we move from one field to another smoothly, but this does not remove the possibility of encountering role conflicts. Communities’ visible and invisible regulations are present in different fields and are negotiable. Status and expectations regarding the same person can be manifested in different ways within the same day when an individual moves from one community to another. An individual is forced into a mobility of roles, even playing various roles simultaneously in some cases. Role negotiations do not occur in a social vacuum, and negotiations do not necessarily lead to a shared mutual understanding. A pattern of behavior perceived as suitable in a role situation can be considered unsuitable in the same individual’s other relationships. Most evidently, people living in a rural village quite often must play different roles among the same people.

Communities and a sense of community are both stimulating and controlling principles for individuation. They reflect pluralism (Etzioni, 1995), a phenomenon through which individuals as consumers and choosers search for individual answers and choices in their lives (e.g., Roos, 1996). A moral community has been sought, for example, from village communities, churches, and a civic society. Morals bring people together through their emotional life. On one hand, communities may be ignorant of the welfare of their members, particularly in cases where the dimension of welfare in question does not connect to the function of a community. On the other hand, communities can easily be close and loyal to their members, but their relationship to the outside world may become problematic (e.g., Allardt, 1964; Etzioni, 1997).

“Small Agency” in the Setting of Community and Private Life

Anu Leinonen (2007) distinguished between three levels of action: society and macro environment, communities and organizations, and individual and personal. In this article, we focus on the level of community as a place of residence and the individual as a member of a community. Marja-Liisa Honkasalo (2009) studied women’s action in their village homes and discusses “small agency.” Small agency is humble and minimal if viewed through the usual social science toolkit that considers the “act” or “agency.” In fact, Honkasalo wonders whether this type of agency can be conceptualized as agency at all:

As basic notions, agency is considered intentional, individual, rational, and normative, aiming at social change in some
measurable sense. An actor—to be a proper actor—needs a goal-oriented mind and the appropriate tools to achieve a rational goal, mostly considered as a form of social transformation. (Honkasalo 2009: p. 65).

Honkasalo studied women’s enduring action in their homes. Enduring action has a social dimension; it is social and inter-subjective in that it takes place in close proximity to others and is shared with them (Honkasalo, 2009; M. Jackson, 1998). There are intermittent phases of passivity and activity, reception and action: Women in the village received the other’s acts to be able to act. Sometimes, this reception consisted of simply keeping oneself open. As social actors, they could entrust themselves to their community, indicating that they could sustain and draw strength from one another. The many acts of a single person can have repercussions for others not only in the sense of being additive or attenuating but also in the sense of dynamic accumulation.

From the community perspective, action is similar to breathing, a process of intermittent phases, where the acts of inhaling and exhaling are equally necessary. The passive, receptive phase of action is extremely important in this sense, but in social science it is rarely thematised. (Honkasalo, 2009: p. 67).

There are two types of attachments that women create through their agency. First, their activities are addressed to repair and fasten social bonds that are in danger of becoming weakened or broken. This bonding is created through small everyday interactions, passive and active, with people and among them. The second type of bond is a grip on the world. Women’s agency takes place without the power of the ritual, in the context of everyday life (Honkasalo, 2009).

Honkasalo’s theory emphasizes action in the context of “home.” The public–private split is among the most classic themes of feminist theory. According to Marja Keränen (1995), the ways we talk about things—ourselves, our lives, society—are structured by the hidden spatialization of the public and private. She argues that distinction works as a hidden metaphor that has been naturalized in the ways we think about the world and structure our social reality.

Feminist scholars have argued that when the spheres became diversified and autonomous, the family was forgotten in the ways in which political science conceptualized the social system. The family that was once a necessary part of the social order was put in the position of external nature in later interpretations. In political theory, family was relegated to privacy. However, the family and the household remain the “basic units of society” (Keränen, 1995). In addition, Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan (2007) raised the question of how diverse groups can be represented and how the public is defined or constituted by officials. According to them, these questions interact with notions of the competence, skills, and practices of participations.

In this article, the community refers both to the common public places of a village and the homes of people. Moreover, it extends beyond the physical boundaries of the village through social networks of people. “Home” as a physical place of housing is culturally coded as private. Feminist scholars have long noted that people who are restricted to the private realm have no place in the realm of life that extends beyond the private sphere of friends and family (Tronto, 1993). Like early feminist scholars, we suggest that action in the sphere of the home is not strictly private. Actions are also reproduced in the community in many ways that are often self-evident. We join the feminist tradition, which criticizes the way social theories understand the home as private and opposite to the public sphere. Age and functional ability can also discursively exclude people from the discussions of community and society.

Data and Analysis

This article is based on several sets of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in East Finland by the authors during 2009-2010 as part of a research project on rural areas, funded by the Finnish Rural Policy Committee.

The focus of the study project was the permanent inhabitants of rural areas outside the population center and their social networks inside and outside the place of residence. We asked what type of structural barriers and possibilities there are for old people to continue living in rural areas and in “homes” in circumstances of centralization and urbanization within Finnish society. The study project has been reported earlier from three perspectives. The first article dealt with the municipal social care policy of old age from the perspective of villages. The second article focused on the questions of opportunities for mobility, and the third one was interested in the community as a resource for older people living in nursing homes. In the present article, we focus on older people as a resource for the community.

The two-step qualitative data collection started with face-to-face interviews with six old-age pensioners who were known as active organizers of their own village in two provinces, Kainuu and North Karelia, in East Finland. In addition, three organizers were interviewed by e-mail and phone. Most of the nine organizers were village leaders. We also analyzed the reports of LEADER projects (88) carried out in a province in 2009. The aim of this phase was to find out the organized activities of older rural people and to choose a case village for actual fieldwork that enables us to search for the non-organized activities and, small agency, of senior villagers. The village that was chosen for fieldwork is situated in North Karelia. During the fieldwork, the main methods for collecting data were observation and discussions with inhabitants of the case village. Researchers visited the village several times during years 2009-2010. The data consist of fieldwork diaries, transcribed interviews of active organizers (6), e-mail discussions with three more organizers, and the
project reports of LEADER projects (88). In addition, two informants wrote an account of the everyday lives of their elderly relatives in the village.

The informants in the study ranged in age from 65 to 90 years in the period 2008-2010, when the study was carried out. Some of the informants had lived in the same village throughout their lives. Most of them, however, had moved to the village during their adult life, in some cases after retirement, whereas others were returnees. The variety of their lifestyles illustrates the variety and heterogeneity of retired people. Seniors in the study lived alone, with a spouse, or with their children’s family in detached houses. Some of them lived in a nursing home. One of the main ideas of the study was to suppose that communal social resources of retired people can be found everywhere, for example, in nursing homes. From this perspective, we ignored people’s potential need for social care and avoided the context of social and health care when interpreting data. We wanted to overcome not only the conceptual split of the public and private sphere but also the split of the third and fourth age.

The interviews with active organizers were carried out in the provinces of Kainuu and North Karelia, situated on the northeast edge of EU, close to the Finnish–Russian border. The provinces have approximately 24,000 inhabitants and their average population density is 3.8 persons/km². The second phase of the study, fieldwork, was carried out in a village in North Karelia. We had numerous informal discussions with villagers and participated in village events there and in the neighborhood. We also visited older people’s homes, including a small private nursing home that was situated in the village. Moreover, we traveled by the local taxi “car-pool,” which was a development project of the municipality aimed at ensuring that people without a car had access to the city center once a week.

In terms of net migration, the municipality where the case study village is situated is one of the most affected municipalities in North Karelia. The population of the municipality was 13,700 inhabitants at the beginning of 2005, but fewer than 12,700 at the beginning of 2010. The average population density in the municipality in 2006 was 3.78 persons/km². In 1980, the proportion of the population above 65 years was 12.5%, whereas in 2006, that figure was 24.8%. The municipality also has one of the highest median ages in Finland, and it is estimated that the proportion of people above the ages of 75 and 85 will continue to increase significantly until 2040.

The research approach can be illustrated through the metaphor of a traveler; the interviewer–traveler wanders through the landscape and enters into conversation with the people encountered. He or she wanders along with the local inhabitants and asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world. The meaning in the original stories is differentiated and unfolded through the traveler’s interpretations (Kvale, 1996). The study is a construction, not a literal photograph of the situation in question. We were interested in seniors as a group as well as the variety of their lifestyles, actions, and social situations. We aimed to produce “thick” descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of a village community from the perspective of pensioners. The descriptions must remain close to the concrete reality but must also reveal the general features of human social life (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

In the study, when collecting data, the case village was defined administratively according to the relevant village action committees. Since the mid-1970s, a large number of village committees have formed, and in 2011, there were 120 village action committees across North Karelia, all based on voluntary village activity. According to the rural policy strategy of North Karelia, the main idea of those committees is to develop the village and the surrounding countryside (Pohjoiskarjalan Kyläohjelma 2014, 2012). For this article, we mainly use fieldwork diaries during visits in the case village. The in-depth thematic interviews with the active organizers of villages are also used.

Active senior organizers were located for interviews with the help of LEADER organizations in East Finland. Every executive manager of an organization could easily name one or more active, regionally well-known seniors above 65 years of age. For the study, we selected nine seniors, of both sexes and different backgrounds, including returnees, newcomers, and people who had lived in the village their whole adult lives. Some of them had bought a small, old house and moved from the city after redecorating the house. Some had built a new house in a rural area for their retirement years. One woman moved to the village as a young wife after marriage with a farmer, and they currently live in a small house in the same barnyard with their daughter’s family, who are now responsible for the farm. Four of interviewees were divorced and remarried; five others were married with their first spouse. Every couple has children and grandchildren.

The village in which the latter fieldwork was carried out is situated approximately 40 km from the center of the municipality. The nearest shop (as well as other services including social and health care services) is situated in the center. Buses no longer travel there, the school was closed about 10 years ago, and the latest shop was closed a year ago. The number of permanent inhabitants is approximately 400, and there is an energetic local village action committee. The village mostly survives off tourism revenues; it is located on a lake, and Finnish national landscape is situated opposite the lake. Because of tourism, the age structure of the village is younger than in neighboring villages. A nursing home is also located in this village. A nursing home in a village is quite an unusual solution for care services because the policy of municipalities with long inner distances is typically to concentrate the services for older people in the city center.

The nursing home was a small private unit of nine residents and six care workers. We visited it several times during the year and spoke with residents and care professionals. Four of the nine residents were interviewed. We wanted to
know about their social bonds in the village and what the meaning of this special village was for them. We also met their relatives when they visited. It turned out that one of the residents did not have any other social bonds in the village, except a daughter and her family. The place as such was not important to her, whereas for the other three people, the village was essential and meaningful. They had strong bonds with the village, its nature, culture, and people. The village as such was a resource for them even if they did not move outside the nursing home or no longer had relatives there (Tedre & Pehkonen, 2011).

The setting of our study is a village. In terms of Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft, the village is both a status community of family, friends, and relatives and an agreement community with an official village action committee. It is the closest living environment of permanent inhabitants. “The village community” as a concept includes both social and physical space, the boundaries of which are continuously changing (Massey, 1995). The village as a community is thus changing at every moment. For example, the winter community differs from the summer community because of the considerable amount of summer residences and leisure residents (Mauss & Beuchat, 1979).

Doreen Massey (1995) critiqued the notion of place as a secure haven that is culturally coherent and bounded. Instead, she demonstrates that the identities of places themselves are in part the product of a long history of connections with other places beyond one’s own. For Massey, places are essentially open and porous, and are the products of links with other places rather than exclusive enclosures sealed off from the outside world. In this article, a village is understood as a place connected with other places. At the same time, it is a community of people who occasionally or permanently live in a specific geographical place with their networks, which overcome the specific place. This article focuses on the permanent inhabitants of the village community.

Aging people in a rural village were not a homogeneous group in relation to their commitment to the village. On the contrary, their connections and attitudes to the village community varied in accordance with their lifestyles, social status, and life courses. Leena Vuorinen (2009) also examined the everyday life of older inhabitants in a small village and constructed the concept of four different ways of life. In her study, the traditional way of life is based on continuity and hard work; the family-oriented way of life is based on family members and relatives; the mobile way of life is characterized by symbolic and concrete mobility; and the fourth way of life was named by Vuorinen as the novel way of life, which the community considered strange, and is marked by independent loneliness. Similarly, the strength of bonds between people in the village community cannot be standardized. This variety of social bonds also concerns the elderly in nursing homes.

Ethical Questions

With respect to ethical considerations, the focus was placed on issues of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. In addition, respondents were informed that their answers were confidential and that the findings would be reported in such a way that anonymity would be ensured. In this study, this means that the names of people have been changed and the locations of fieldwork are presented on a general level without exact names.

Findings

Social Resources

The interviews with active senior organizers in East Finland villages of this study, as is the case with many former studies, indicated that retired people formed a notable social resource for the rural community in their many roles as volunteers. They acted as line managers and as other voluntary workers of rural development projects, as well as in various country-side organizations. Within the role of managers of development projects, they used their former occupational knowledge as well as their professional or political networks. They had strong skills in leading local development projects and offering novel ideas, all the while encouraging, stimulating, and completing project applications and evaluation reports, gathering people together, organizing volunteer work and even acting as volunteers themselves. In accordance with Putnam’s (2000) idea of social capital, they sustained the public good, ensuring that people share values and that the mutual trust of community members was available to everyone. Ties between individuals, and particularly voluntary cooperation within formal associations, helped to increase social capital in the community as a whole. As Murdoch (2000) puts it when discussing social capital, the actions of people, including those among whom we carry out research, are inherently social and performed, continually placed within networks of social relations. The attitudes and actions of people are meaningful in themselves, acting out the sociality (the social process) that is often sought at the level of the community.

Some of the projects were “blue-sky projects” involving, for example, building an observatory in a village. Some of the retired developers interviewed for the study participated in almost every action on many levels concerning the village’s development. Some respondents outlined activities through which they believed their special skills would be most useful for the village. Those people were perceived as “active villagers, as a part of community—on their own conditions” (organizer, woman, 68). The organizer chooses what to do and with whom to associate (Bourdieu, 1986).

Every organizer we met seemed to be a recognized and notable resource for the village, in some cases for the municipality and more broadly as well. They were aware of their responsibility for the future of the village. They identified the
responsibility to society based on reciprocity as the most important among their various motives. In doing so, they can share the knowledge, skills, and experiences obtained during their lifetime. For them, the success and affluence of the village was in the common interest of every villager; the interests of the village can thus rise above individual interests.

In addition to the active organizers, many other senior villagers participated in common activities of their own village, such as “talkoot” as well as various other forms of voluntary work. “Talkoot” is a traditional rural community action, a form of volunteer work based on norms of solidarity and communality. Common action usually focuses on concrete, short-period work performed for one family or for the community as whole. In agriculture, it was the norm that at least one member of every family would participate in talkoot. Typical works were, for instance, haymaking and roofing. As a return gift, food and drink were served to participants.

In our village, too, the older volunteer workers are 78 years old. Older people never complain, that they should get some compensation (get some payment). (senior organizer, man, 67)

According to active organizers, talkoot was both a form of socializing and reproducing the social cohesion of community. Moreover, talkoot was rational, goal-oriented action. “You should achieve some tangible results there (in talkoot) and you must every time have good serving and you must know when to stop before it becomes too hard to continue” (senior organizer, man, 76). The emotional community becomes visible in talkoot and reproduces community by strengthening the overall sense of community. “Talkoot is a kind of social action—it is important to be present, involved in talkoot, not necessarily that you work hard. It is a sense of solidarity and emotional togetherness” (senior organizer, man, 70).

The new retired villagers brought new resources such as knowledge, social networks, skills, and labor. We analyzed social capital outcomes as a dynamic relationship, taking into account the volunteer work performed and viewing the villagers as actors rather than simply as members of the village. Their action increases the social capital in the village. Just as A. Gray (2009) concluded, supportive friendship may arise from participatory activities.

The participation in talkoot is visible action that the community appreciates. In addition to talkoot, older people performed a great deal of other volunteer work. They kept up club activities and participated as members of numerous associations. In many cases, they took on a strong responsibility for a certain neighbor’s well-being. At times, their responsibility and bond were so strong that it was difficult to refer to it as “neighborly help” or “voluntary work,” which is based on equality. Small degrees of help had sometimes become quite large over time. The idea of reciprocity (Coleman, 1988) is thus no longer fulfilled. It would seem that, in genuinely communal neighborhoods, residents support and view each other in a civilized way and develop goodwill toward one another. A neighborhood seems to form people’s conceptions of their neighbors regardless of whether they actively rub shoulders with them. Symbolic interaction, social interaction, and the act of individuals bonding with other people and places belong to a neighborhood and neighborhood relationships (Unger & Wandersman, 1985).

Senior villagers as transformers of cultural heritage as well as transformers of occupational and other knowledge also became recognized through this research. In particular, their experiential, practical, and local knowledge was used. On a practical level, they advised leisure residents on how to adapt to unpredictable road conditions or how to behave on the lake in different circumstances during the four seasons. They also told newcomers about the social history of the village.

The former retired villagers who had moved from the village to population centers took part in village events, especially in the summertime. By participating, they reproduced their emotional bond as members of the local community. At the same time, they strengthened the social bonds between present and former residents. In the summertime, the village community expanded because of the summer residents, and many of them are retired people as well. All of these people may reproduce social cohesion in the community by their personal, non-material investments into the community (Hanifan, 1916).

Unrecognized Resources

The organized action described above as a form of common action is quite easy to interpret as a part of the social capital creation within a village community and is also relatively easy to analyze in the context of rural development or productive aging. One of the main aims of our study was to recognize communal forms of not so clearly identified action, “small agency”—as Honkasalo (2009) called it. Seniors who no longer participate in common action also live in the village. We did not meet them at all outside their own houses. However, we could visit a few of them when some of their relatives asked them to permit our visit. Not everyone wanted to meet the foreign researchers, but often, some of their younger relatives told us about their everyday lives. As permanent inhabitants of the village, those older people also reproduce the community through various forms of small agency in their homes or even in the nursing home in the village.

Older villagers reproduce the social community by just being there, by their simple presence in the place, and by being villagers. Many of them followed local newspapers or were otherwise interested in what was happening in the village. If they do not participate in the village actions, they become invisible in the context of the community in the sense that other villagers did not recognize their presence as active participants of community. We researchers came from
outside the community and could find aspects of small communal activity that were too self-evident for the villagers themselves to recognize.

For instance, Marja and Seppo Järvinen, a couple above 80 years old, lived in Marja’s birthplace in a small house that Seppo built in the 1960s. The families of their five children live in the southern part of Finland or abroad. By living in the village, Marja and Seppo offered their children and grandchildren a place to stay during the children’s leisure time. At the same time, they offered the former generations the possibility to reproduce their village community ties. Järvinen’s home was also a place that summer residents visited when they needed knowledge about local circumstances or practical skills, which were especially necessary in the countryside. It was also a place for researchers to collect information about the village. In terms of human capital, Marja and Seppo had skills and capabilities that make newcomers act in new ways (Coleman, 1988).

Another example, Maija and Matti Hassinen, a sister and brother both above 70 years of age, also lived in their birthplace. Almost everyone in the village knew them, although they did not move in the village anymore after the shop was closed. Their family has lived in the place as farmers for three generations. Their five siblings who live outside the village visit regularly; one reason for the visits was to take care of Maija and Matti. At the same time, they reproduced their own relationship with their birthplace and village.

During fieldwork, we discovered many repeated everyday actions, “matter of course” actions, which following the ideas of Honkasalo (2009), can be interpreted as small community agency. Elderly people took care of their garden or yard and the buildings—sometimes with their relatives—and felt responsible for their environment and surroundings. Their actions in the context of home reproduce the village invisible and also in quite invisible, culturally self-evident ways.

We also included the inhabitants of the nursing home as members of the village community. In Finnish rural policy, aging villagers who need social care are mostly observed as “others” who need services, especially if they live in residential institutions. They are no longer viewed as members of the village community. Our discussions with the nursing home inhabitants indicated that for several reasons, the village—not just the nursing home—was an important social context for them (Tedre & Pehkonen, 2011). However, in contrast, the nursing home with its inhabitants was important for the village community. Neither of these two viewpoints is recognized in Finnish rural policy or social policy. The importance of the nursing home was also a self-evident, “matter of course” for villagers outside the nursing home. Thus, the nursing home formed a part of the village’s institutional structure similar to the village shop and the tourism enterprise. It was the biggest employer in the village, and people nearby knew the nursing home and some of their relatives lived or had lived in it. As such, the nursing home’s residents formed a part of the emotional social community. Moreover, the nursing home was a social arena for villagers to meet occupants of the nursing home, as well as each other. In addition, some senior villagers of the nursing home represented a living history of the village. For us as researchers, some of them turned out to be key informants of village life, even if they had problems remembering short-term details.

Discussion

Urbanization and the growth of the aging population are some of the most important ongoing social trends in the world. The consequences of urbanization are reflected in rural areas, where the process of communities’ aging is often the most rapid due to depopulation and out-migration from rural to urban areas. The political discussions concerning the consequences of rural aging are largely problem-oriented, and/or the role of seniors in social change is unclear. In this context, retired people are often invisible, or they exist in social studies and political discussions mainly in the context of economic productivity, the family, or through the need for care, often on a structural institutional level through the lack of sufficient public social and health care services for them. This structural “care service approach” is especially emphasized in the “Nordic welfare states,” including Finland, with its traditionally strong public sector responsibility in terms of social and health care services. Local authorities are afraid that public services, and the structures for providing them—welfare structures that have been built over several decades—are being endangered by the approach of market liberation. The discussion emphasizes the withdrawal of services in the countryside and focuses on the problems of rural residents. In this context, “the elderly” are perceived through their needs, not as actors in their community.

The ways in which we discuss and categorize members of a community can exclude people, for instance, retired people, and, if not everyone, most evidently the people who no longer participate in common local activities in concrete ways. The aim of this article was, first, to challenge the problem-oriented approach to rural aging through a resource perspective by asking about the types of social resources that seniors have in their local communities in the Finnish rural context. The local community is not merely a group of individuals but also a group that cooperates in various ways and personally shares varying aspects of common life. It is a moral community whose senior members feel a responsibility for the continuation and development of their community. Conceptually, a rural community in this article is an area that is geographically clustered and also contains a network of social relationships that go far beyond its geographical boundaries.

Instead of viewing senior rural residents through their own needs, in the context of their own social networks or “just” as members of the community, we approach them as social actors and resources in the common life of the
community. The older members of the community are not all actors in a similar way. Many of them have visible roles in several communal tasks, as reported in many earlier studies. People who strive toward “just being there” are most evidently excluded from the idea of being actors in the community setting. Therefore, second, by applying the concept of small agency, we challenge the social theories’ meanings of agency as rational and goal-oriented, and aimed at social change in some measurable sense. Small agency refers to enduring action with intermittent phases of passivity and activity and reproduction and action. The passive and receptive phase of actions is important. The concept of small action also offers a tool with which to analyze and interpret the communal dimensions of action in the context of home and informal, non-organized settings.

The case study of this article, rural East Finland and a village with few inhabitants, is a small unit that offers a field in which to identify communal ties, networks, and social resources through an ethnographic research approach. As a result of the study, we find that, in circumstances of urbanization, seniors in rural communities form a significant force that both remolds and reproduces the community. They often feel strong responsibility for the future of their own residential area and share a common life through a common commitment to their surroundings.

The village community is simultaneously caregiving and rational. On one hand, visible and noticeable social action shapes and changes the community. On the other hand, everyday activities and culturally self-evident action keep the community alive. The latter can be characterized by repetitive and practical daily action without a clear aim to change anything; as such, it can be completely overlooked by the community, as well as by rural and social policy or research. Older villagers’ community responsibility is expressed in concrete and symbolic ways.

In the context of small agency, we separate some dimensions of action. The dimensions are not extensive but rather a preliminary experiment to offer the role of actor to those older community members who, usually in Finnish studies, have been studied as clients in the institutional context of welfare services. One of those dimensions is existence, being there and, as such, being a part of the community. Another dimension is their function to repair and fasten the social bonds of former villagers to the village community, for instance, by informing them of important events in the village and keeping their homes ready for adult children to visit. The third dimension is the role of mediator, for instance, by mediating local knowledge for newcomers. The fourth dimension addresses their relationship to their environment. They may act as caretakers of the environment through practical, concrete action at home and on their properties.

The community is constructed in people’s everyday lives. Much everyday action happens in people’s homes, which are culturally coded as part of the private sphere and are therefore excluded from the analysis of the community. Everyday action also continues in nursing homes, which are often observed as segregated units outside their social environment. This exclusion constructs the ways we think about community actions and in turn structures our social reality. A community may function as an adhering environment in which the characterizing feature is that of support.

In conclusion, we suggest that although, from the perspective of rural communities, ongoing macro-level social processes such as urbanization, depopulation, market liberalization, centralization, and their consequent withdrawal of services all bring essential social problems to the context of rural community, remote-area communities not only try to survive but also search for new ways to develop. In addition, in Nordic countries, the responsibility of the public sector for welfare care services has been strong for decades and has also reached fringe areas. This has been especially true in Finland, where the municipality instead of the state has been the main actor with the responsibility for services. In circumstances where public institutional structures are becoming sparser, the role of community actors grows. A significant portion of the community actors are older, retired people who act for the community in several often unidentified and unrecognized ways. This perspective is underestimated in political discussions and even in actor-based social studies of rural areas. Paying attention to “small agency” enlarges the scope for more adequately recognizing how older people may make a contribution to society.

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Tedre and Pehkonen

9
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