Ageing in Rural Communities: Family Contacts and Community Integration†

G. CLARE WENGER*

ABSTRACT
Based on a study of the elderly in rural communities, the paper makes comparisons with data from more urban studies in the U.K. The findings indicate that while availability of and contact with family members is comparable, satisfaction with the amount of contact is considerably higher in the rural context. This higher level of satisfaction holds even for retired migrants who have less contact. It is suggested that satisfaction may be higher because needs for contact are met by a greater variety of other forms of association and support. The data demonstrate that the rural elderly do in fact have higher levels of contact with neighbours; are more likely to belong to voluntary associations; are more likely to belong to a religious group and to be visited by the clergy, and are more likely to become involved in sparetime activities which enhance the likelihood for social contact. Dependency on family, therefore, appears to be lower. While rural communities do not appear to preserve family cohesion, opportunities for community integration are enhanced and are reflected in higher levels of satisfaction.

Introduction

The last few years have seen a renewed interest in the elderly in the community, stimulated in large part by the surveys of Hunt and Abrams. Hunt’s study was based on a representative sample of England, where approximately four-fifths of the population is considered to be urban and

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* Social Services in Rural Areas Research Project, Department of Social Theory and Institutions, University College of North Wales, Bangor, U.K.
Abrams’ study was drawn from four ‘socially different urban areas’. Both of these studies, therefore, concentrated on basically urban populations. While the rural elderly have been the object of scientific study in the U.S., far less interest has been directed towards this minority group in the U.K. Based on the findings of a recent survey conducted in selected communities in North Wales, this paper looks at some aspects of ageing in the rural context and attempts comparisons with data from the above surveys.

Both the countryside and the elderly are emotive topics and as such have become the subject of their own stereotypes, myths and assumptions. The image of the rural community as a haven of peace and neighbourliness and an escape from the physical and social excesses of urban life, continues to have a seductive appeal. ‘There is some corner in the (English) mind that is forever Ambridge’ suggested one writer in New Society and in another context it has been suggested that the village has become a symbol for a sense of belonging that has been lost. Village life is seen as one end of a continuum, the other end of which is the megalopolis. It is the Gemeinschaft of Tönnies, the sacred society of Redfield and, perhaps less value-laden, the more intimate rural community of Frankenberg. This image of the intimacy and harmony of village life was reinforced by the largely functionalist community studies of the nineteen-fifties which emphasized the stability of such communities. Over the last quarter of a century it has become difficult to know whether this image is a valid one; if it is merely an ideal type set up to balance the atomistic image of alienation in the cities, a kind of Jungian collective yearning for ‘the world we have lost’ or a realistic assessment of small scale society through time as Schumacher would have us believe.

This image of the rural community, however, does not exist independently of some of the favourite images of old age. Despite research findings to the contrary the stereotype of the disintegration of the extended family continues to persist, particularly among health and social service practitioners who deal mainly with pathology. It seems fair to say, however, that the breakdown of the extended family is a stereotype associated with urbanization and that the rural environment is generally perceived as more benign and more supportive. This paper, therefore, seeks by reference to the three studies mentioned above, to test two major hypotheses:

1. that the availability of and contacts with family are greater for the rural elderly, because the breakdown of the extended family is less advanced; and
2. that the rural community represents an environment which by nature of its scale and character leads to greater integration for the elderly.
The studies on which the comparisons are based have the following characteristics:

**Hunt: The elderly at home**

This survey was carried out in 1976 by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS). Its purpose was 'to investigate the social circumstances of elderly people, defined as men and women aged 65 and over, living in private households in the community' in England (p. 1). The sample of 1975 was subsequently weighted to achieve an accurate age distribution of those in the 65–74 and 75+ age brackets. The stratified random sample was based on ninety parliamentary constituencies and drawn from electoral registers. Some data were presented with breakdowns for high, medium and low population density areas, retirement areas and metropolitan areas but most tables were based on the total sample.

**Abrams: Beyond three-score and ten**

As the title suggests, this survey instituted by Age Concern, concentrated on the old-elderly, those seventy-five or older, and was aimed at ‘discovering more than we already know about the needs, conditions and resources of today’s 75 and over population.’ (p. 3.) This study, conducted in 1977, was also of the elderly living in the community and the sample consisted of 800 people of 75 and over and 800 in the 65–74 age range for comparison. The sample was selected in equal numbers from four ‘socially different urban areas’, based on a probability sample of one-hundred blocks of dwellings and a door to door approach. 1646 interviews were completed. The sample was unstratified apart from selection of socially different areas. Data were presented comparing the old-elderly with the young-elderly; broken down by town, class and whether or not living alone depending on the emphasis of analysis.

**Rural Welsh survey**

The rural study was conducted in 1979 funded by the DHSS and was designed to investigate the circumstances of the sixty-fives and over living in the rural community, with particular attention to the nature and sources of informal and statutory help. The sample was based on a selection of communities representing different settlement types from a dispersed upland sheep-farming area to a small seaside town of approximately 2000. Respondents were identified by door to door census in the chosen communities and subsequent sampling of one person per elderly
household in small communities and 50 per cent of elderly households in larger communities. This sample was representative of the proportions of population living in similar sized communities within the study region. However, the region under scrutiny is more sparsely populated than most English rural areas. A total of 534 interviews were completed, weighted to 705 on the basis of the number of old persons in the household. A quarter of respondents were retirement migrants (i.e. had moved more than fifteen miles after age sixty) and in all communities more than 17 per cent of the population were retired thus falling into the same category as Hunt’s retirement areas. Almost three-fifths of the rural sample were Welsh speakers.

All studies were policy oriented and covered the broad range of demographic and social data. Although attempts to replicate part of Hunt’s findings were made in the rural survey, some difficulties in comparison are presented and will be discussed in context. In most instances the rural data can be compared with only one of the urban studies. Thus contacts and satisfaction with contact with relatives is compared with Abrams’ study, broken down accordingly to distinguish between the under and over-seventy-fives and community participation is compared pre-dominantly with Hunt’s findings.

The total sample of rural elderly does not purport to represent a stratified sample of all the rural elderly any more than Abrams’ study is a sample of all the urban elderly. That is, neither sample was matched on the basis of proportions of the total elderly population living in various sized communities in the U.K. Abrams selected equal numbers in four ‘socially different’ urban areas and the rural study reflects the distribution of population within communities with less than 5000 population in the districts of Meirionnydd and Glyndwr in North Wales, an area of very sparse population not within easy reach of any large urban concentration. One interest of the rural study was in the differences between communities. Twenty-five per cent of the rural sample are retired migrants, but they were concentrated in certain communities and no figures exist for the total rural population. Abrams’ study gives no data on migration history and Hunt gives data only for last move, which is not related to age.

The study environments

Availability of Neighbours

There are, of course, obvious differences between urban and rural communities and one of the most visible is the scatter of population and the consequent availability of neighbours which exists in rural areas.
To drive through the countryside, the essence of the picturesque is the often haphazard arrangement of dwellings and one is aware of the distances between some residences. The presence of second homes in some regions means that the sparsity of population is sometimes greater than the sparsity of homes. This means that often nearest year-round neighbours may be more distant than the nearest house. The proximity of neighbours can be crucially important for the elderly, but their presence is not something that can be taken for granted in the country.

The study communities were chosen to reflect the full range of settlement patterns, from nucleated towns to areas with very dispersed settlement. The average distance between small towns in the regions studied is about twenty miles. Overall, in spite of the greater weight of the population of the nucleated settlements, a quarter of the elderly people surveyed had no year-round next door neighbours, and for nearly a fifth, the nearest neighbour lives more than fifty yards away, in contrast with the assumed situation in urban areas. However, the range is wide and the more rural communities, although the real numbers are small, have many elderly living in remote places. Of course, few of them may be completely alone, but their opportunities for social interaction are reduced. This is more significant in social terms than in terms of risk; eighty-two per cent of those living alone have next door neighbours. However, there appears to be a high tolerance of physical isolation, only three per cent overall feel that their homes are too isolated.

Public Transport

The availability of public transport is another constraint faced by rural dwellers. Fifty per cent of respondents use no form of public transport compared with only eleven per cent in Hunt's survey. In the most isolated community studied, seventy-eight per cent use no public transport, relying instead on private cars, their own or lifts in someone else's. Some people interviewed live more than two miles from the nearest bus route and bus services in all but the smaller towns may run twice a week or at most twice a day. Only just over a third of respondents ever use the bus and less than one-fifth use the train.* Of those who do use public transport, one quarter find high fares a problem. Even with subsidies to rural bus companies, the average round trip bus fare into town leaves little change from a pound.

Any discussion of concessions on fares either local for buses or national

* This reflects the fact that only two communities are on a railway line and in those communities more than twice as many use the train, but for the majority of rural residents access to trains is distant and difficult.
for trains, is obviously derisory in this context. In fact in those communities where bus tokens are issued, they are for five to seven pounds per annum, i.e. at maximum five outings. This situation was also found by Hunt's survey, where the absence of concessions was most common in retirement areas and four times as likely in medium and low population density areas as in high density areas (p. 118).

**Cars and Telephones**

On the other hand, constraints of scattered settlements and of inadequate public transport are off-set by higher car and telephone ownership. Fifty per cent of the rural elderly live in households with cars, compared with only thirty-one per cent of Hunt's respondents who had access to a household car; and twice as many drive, thirty-four per cent compared with seventeen per cent.

Sixty-five per cent are on the telephone, compared with forty-four per cent of Hunt's sample. Of those without a 'phone, only three per cent have tried to get one through social services and those who comment state mainly that they do not need one. Several old people said that they had never used a 'phone and that when needed neighbours 'phoned for them. On the other hand, several said that the 'phone had been put in and was paid for by their children as a present and safeguard but several commented that they never made outgoing calls except in an emergency.

**Summary**

Neighbours and public transport are less available to the rural elderly but more rural elderly households have cars and telephones. On the other hand, different constraints and advantages exist in urban areas. Whereas the urban dweller almost certainly has others living close by and most have access to public transport, distance is not the only physical constraint and access to social contacts may be limited by high-rise accommodation or fear of traffic, crowded pavements and, particularly at night, fear of crime. By the same token, the scale of public services in urban areas (shops, post offices, libraries, churches, etc.) is such that interactions are more likely to be role exchanges than in small rural settlements where most people are known by name to one another whatever level of intimacy exists between them. What this paper seeks to measure is the amount of various types of social contact achieved by the elderly in these very different environments.
Family ties and contacts

In both our rural elderly population and in Hunt's predominantly urban sample, the overall age and sex distributions are approximately the same, with females outnumbering males 2:1. In the rural areas, because of the greater tendency for women to move at all stages of the life cycle into small towns, and the agricultural economic base, there is a higher proportion of males in the least densely populated communities.

With regard to marital status, nearly twice as many of the rural elderly have never married; in our sample fifteen per cent were single whereas Hunt found only eight per cent. In the rural sample three females are single for every two single men, compared with five females for every two unmarried men in Hunt's sample. As a proportion of the elderly population, almost twice as many females and three times as many males are single in the rural areas. The proportions who are single, however, are almost twice as high in those age groups over eighty than in younger age groups and so the implications for future service provision are less significant.

The proportion of those with no living close relatives also appears to be comparable, three per cent compared with Hunt's five per cent, and Hunt found no significant regional difference within her sample.

The overall social class distribution of the rural elderly is comparable with that in Hunt's sample. Whilst acknowledging the shortcomings of the conventional designations for the elderly and for rural populations where up to a quarter may be self-employed, it is perhaps important to note that while the overall distribution is comparable the indigenous population is skewed towards the Registrar General's categories II (white collar managerial) and IV (semi-skilled manual), while retirement migrants to the region cluster in class III (skilled manual). Abrams' and Hunt's populations were also roughly comparable.

So we can take it that overall in terms of age, sex, the existence of close living relatives and social class the rural elderly and the urban elderly are very much alike but more of the rural elderly have never married. Comparable data on the availability of and contact with siblings, children and grandchildren exist only from the Abrams’ study. However, this has the advantage of making the comparison one between a wholly urban and a wholly rural sample. Following Abrams, those aged seventy-five or more will be referred to as the old-elderly and those aged 65–74 as the young-elderly. Table 1 compares availability and contact with the three most significant categories of relatives.
From the Table it is apparent that the availability of siblings to the old-elderly and the young-elderly is roughly comparable in both environments, although slightly more of the rural old-elderly and very slightly more of the urban young-elderly are without brothers and sisters. Overall, however, the availability of siblings is comparable.

In the rural communities, thirty-one per cent of the old-elderly see a sibling at least weekly compared with twenty-four of the urban old-elderly. So in this older age group it seems that contact between siblings is more frequent in the rural areas, even though slightly fewer have siblings.

Among the young-elderly, differences between urban and rural respondents are minimal with twenty-four per cent and twenty-six per cent respectively seeing a brother or sister at least weekly. The fact that there is more contact with siblings for the rural old-elderly reflects the higher incidence of those who have never married in this group and who have remained in the natal areas. Research shows that siblings take the place of spouse and children as significant others for this group, and we would, therefore, expect greater frequency of contact.13

Children

In terms of instrumental support for the elderly, children are the most important category of relative. Equal numbers of the old-elderly are childless, in spite of the fact that a higher proportion of rural residents never married — apparently those who did marry were more fertile! The
rural young-elderly are slightly more likely to have children, only a quarter being childless compared with a third of the urban sample.

In spite of the emphasis placed on rural migration patterns, more of the rural old-elderly have a child within five miles but weekly contact is approximately the same. In terms of availability and frequency of contact there appears to be little significant difference between old parents in town and country. Equal proportions of rural and urban young-elderly parents have a child within five miles but young-elderly urban parents see more of their children with two-thirds receiving at least weekly visits compared with less than half of similar rural parents. In summary, then, contact between old-elderly parents and their children is roughly comparable but rural young-elderly parents have less contact with children.

**Grandchildren**

The importance of grandchildren to elderly people is often stressed and certainly the photographs of grandchildren in many an old person’s living room are evidence enough to support this relationship as a source of pleasure. Over half of the urban old-elderly had grandchildren (fifty-seven per cent) and while slightly more of the rural old-elderly were grandparents (sixty-two per cent), the difference is too small to be significant. Two-thirds of the young-elderly were grandparents in both urban and rural areas.

The amount of contact with grandchildren is exactly comparable. Our rural old-grandparents, however, seem to be more content with the amount of contact with their grandchildren, with slightly less than a quarter saying they wished they saw more of their grandchildren (including those who wished to see more of some of them), compared with ‘slightly over half’ of urban old-grandparents. In other words, twice as many urban old-grandparents want more contact with their grandchildren. Half the urban young grandparents felt that they would like to see more of their grandchildren, whereas less than a third of the younger rural grandparents felt this way.

**Summary of Contact with Family**

The preceding paragraphs have looked at the availability of and frequency of contact with siblings, children and grandchildren of the elderly and compared urban with rural findings. So far as the urban-rural continuum is concerned, differences in availability are not very significant. The only significant differences are that the rural old-elderly have slightly more contact with siblings, as a result of higher incidence of singleness in this
age group; and the young-elderly have less contact with children, perhaps reflecting out-migration of the young, retirement migration or less perceived need, which will be discussed in a subsequent section.

So far satisfaction with the frequency of contact has been discussed only with reference to grandchildren. Abrams' gives no figures for satisfaction with contact with siblings. Where children and siblings are concerned, in the rural survey, satisfaction was tabulated for each relative so that it is impossible to say of any one respondent that they want more contact with their children or siblings, since they may wish more contact with one out of four for instance. Overall, nineteen per cent of all children are seen less frequently than desired by their parents, but this of course does not mean that nineteen per cent of parents are dissatisfied with their contact with children; some parents may wish to see more of more than one child. However, even if this figure did represent parents dissatisfied with the amount of contact with children at least eighty per cent of elderly parents would be satisfied with the frequency of contact with their children. For the urban parents, forty-five per cent of the old-elderly and thirty-nine per cent of the young-elderly would like to see more of their children; therefore, at least twice as many urban parents are dissatisfied with the amount of contact they have with their children, in spite of the fact that levels of contact overall are comparable or very slightly higher. Twice as many urban grandparents are also more dissatisfied with the amount of contact with grandchildren.

In summation it appears that the availability of siblings, children and grandchildren to rural and urban elderly people is comparable, as is frequency of contact. Data from Abrams' study relating to satisfaction with contact are available only for children and grandchildren. However, Abrams' data are only directly comparable with the rural data on grandchildren, which show that twice as many urban grandparents want more contact with their grandchildren. While the urban and rural data for satisfaction with contact with children are not directly comparable, these too demonstrate that at least twice as many urban parents seek more contact with their children. In other words, while the amount of contact with their families is similar, the rural elderly appear to be much more satisfied than the urban elderly. It may be that satisfaction is greater because needs for human contact, interaction and validation are being met by a greater diversity of other forms of association or support.
Community Integration

Now let us consider the hypothesis that the rural community represents an environment which leads to greater integration of the elderly. It is, of course, difficult to measure 'integration' and in this regard the findings must be considered as indicative rather than definitive. Indications of integration considered here are: contact and interaction with neighbours; participation and involvement in voluntary and religious organizations and other spare-time activities.

Neighbours

The importance of neighbours to elderly people, especially those living alone, goes without saying. Given some of the distances involved in our study area, it is surprising to find that only two per cent feel that they are without neighbours and another two per cent have no contact with their neighbours. In fact, most respondents found it difficult if not impossible to make a distinction between neighbours and friends and a frequent answer to a question asking if they had real friends in the area was, ‘All the neighbours are my friends.’

Compared with Hunt’s findings, rural residents appear to get on slightly better with their neighbours, with ninety-six per cent getting on well with most or all of their neighbours compared with eighty-eight per cent of Hunt’s sample. Interestingly enough, the proportions saying that they get on well with all their neighbours are highest in the most dispersed communities. Only two per cent overall say there are no neighbours from whom they can ask favours, compared with five times as many in Hunt’s study. Given the fact that for eleven per cent the nearest neighbour is more than one hundred yards away (seventy-three per cent in one community) it appears that there is more neighbouring going on in the countryside, in spite of the distances involved between households, or perhaps because the distances from services lead to more inter-dependence.

While comparable statistics for urban areas are not available, it is also worth mentioning here that in addition to the ninety-one per cent of the elderly who say that they see neighbours to talk to regularly, sixty-six per cent talk regularly with people in the local shops, sixty-two per cent with members of the community other than neighbours, fifty-seven per cent with church or chapel members, fifty-five per cent with the postman and forty-six per cent with the milkman. Only one per cent said they never talked with anyone in any of these categories.
Voluntary Associations

Participation in voluntary organizations can be looked at as one measure of community integration. It may provide role-continuity after retirement and can provide an important source of social contacts. Membership in such associations declines with age among rural and urban residents but overall participation is higher in rural communities. Almost half of the rural elderly belong to at least one organization (other than a church or chapel) compared with just over a third in Hunt's survey.

This higher participation in voluntary organizations is contrary to intuition, since for many the travelling necessary to sustain membership is difficult and the smaller communities may not have a wide choice of associations, some for instance have no OAP groups. In spite of these drawbacks, overall twice as many belong to pensioners' groups, twice as many to the British Legion, and comparable proportions to trade unions, political and professional organizations, the Red Cross and the Women's Royal Voluntary Service. More than three times as many belong to the Women's Institute – and this is one group where membership declines less steeply with age. The Townswomen's Guild was absent from the list since the organization is rarely found in the small rural towns but *Merched Y Wawr* which is the Welsh language equivalent of the Women's Institute is included. In Hunt's survey, seven per cent of women belong to the Women's Institute or the Townswomen's Guild. In the rural survey, combining the percentages for the Women's Institute and *Merched y Wawr*, twenty-nine per cent belong to a women's group. Even allowing for the very few women who claim membership in both groups, this is approximately four times the proportion of urban women who seek such association. (See Table 2.)

Hunt gives no figure for attendance at meetings and indeed some of the groups to which elderly people belong, such as professional organizations, may have no local meetings. However, it is worth noting that of the total sample of rural elderly over a third attend meetings of voluntary associations regularly.

Unfortunately, Hunt's study gives no figures for membership of religious institutions, church, chapel, synagogue, etc. Abrams gives figures for membership in 'church/chapel/synagogue groups' but it is unclear whether these are social groups associated with religious institutions comparable to Hunt's 'church and religious organisations' which do 'not include church going only' (p. 126) or whether they refer to membership of religious bodies. But, since Hunt's (p. 126) and Abrams' (p. 16) figures are comparable at approximately 12–13 per cent, it seems likely that they both refer to groups which are associated with religious institu-
tions rather than religious activity. While not comparable, it seems important to note that more than eighty per cent of the rural sample claim membership of church, non-conformist chapel or other religious group, and more than seventy-five per cent attend at least sometimes. Almost half the elderly attend at least once a month and nearly two-fifths every week. Attendance declines slightly with age but only after eighty-five and there is little difference between the sexes.

Hunt found that sixteen per cent of all the elderly had been visited by a clergyman within the six months preceding interview (more in the North and North-West (over twenty per cent)). However, in rural Wales fifty per cent had been visited in the same period and forty-two per cent received visits from other visitors from the church.

Wales, like Scotland, is well known for its strong Non-conformist tradition, so it is difficult to say whether the importance of religious activity is a cultural or rural phenomenon. Five times as many non-Welsh as Welsh are non-members, so it is perhaps important to acknowledge that this may be an ethnic phenomenon rather than a rural one. On the other hand, the valid distinction may be between indigenous country people and incomers and it would be interesting to look at comparable data from other rural areas. The findings may also reflect the predominant use of the Welsh language by the non-conformist groups. In parts of rural Wales, the chapel (non-conformist) still plays an important, though waning social role as a focus of the community. Although no comparable figures on membership are available, it seems apparent that the salience of religious membership is far higher in the rural community.
Hobbies, Interests and Spare-time Activities

The importance of meaningful activity is also important for self-image and life-satisfaction. So it is also worth considering rural–urban differences in participation in hobbies and other interests. A comparison of findings by Hunt and from the rural survey is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of hobbies and interests with Hunt (p. 127) (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Total Rural Communities</th>
<th>Total Hunt</th>
<th>Males Rural Communities</th>
<th>Males Hunt</th>
<th>Females Rural Communities</th>
<th>Females Hunt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV/Radio</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>91/76,1,2</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>91/72,2</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>91/76,1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knitting (needlework)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Crafts (including woodwork)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor games (cards, bingo, etc)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport (of any kind)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other activities 4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 TV/Radio separately
2 After prompt
3 Rural study included sewing
4 Not included in our list but listed separately by Hunt – Repairs and re-decorating, cooking, preserving, wine-making, church activities, spectator sports.
5 Hunt’s figures based on non-prompted responses.

Interviewers on the rural survey were instructed not to prompt respondents but comments from the interviewers to the research team indicate that respondents asked for examples which were then given. It seems reasonable therefore, to compare Hunt’s total figures, including prompted replies for the commonest activities, television, radio, reading and knitting.

Television and radio head the list for both urban and rural residents and there seems to be little difference between the regions in the importance of this activity. Comparable proportions also engage in knitting, indoor games (cards, bingo, etc.), music and sport. But eight times as many rural residents report walking as a hobby and almost twice as many gardening and these proportions hold for men and women. Almost three
times as many rural women report various arts and crafts, although for men the figure is comparable. On the other hand, urban residents appear to spend more time reading, particularly men.

The overall effect appears to be that the rural elderly are more involved in those hobbies and activities that are likely to involve them in outdoor physical activity and manual dexterity. Walking and gardening, of course, in addition to providing exercise and fresh air and thus aiding health and morale, also increase the potential for outside social contacts.

**Summary of Community integration**

In summary, it appears that in spite of reduced opportunities, as a result of distance and lack of public transport, the rural elderly have more contact with neighbours than their urban counterparts; are more likely to belong to voluntary organizations; to be in contact with a religious institution and to engage in those spare-time activities which provide potential for contact with others. Based on these indicators, it appears that their integration with the community at large is higher than that of the urban elderly.

**Note on Retirement Migration**

In any discussion of the rural elderly it is essential to recognize that there are at least two distinct groups of elderly people living in the rural areas: those whose growing old is a continuation of growing up and/or raising families in the countryside and those who have chosen the countryside as a place in which to grow old. The rural sample discussed in this paper included twenty-five per cent who were retirement migrants. The populations of rural communities, however, must be treated as entities in considerations of social well-being, in any study of the status quo and in considerations of service provision. However, it is important to note that (retirement) migrants have less contact with relatives than do long-term residents or (with the exception of old-elderly siblings) urban residents. (See Table 4.) The same may be true within urban elderly populations for whom no migration history is available. It is interesting to see, however, that retirement migrants are less dissatisfied with contact with grandchildren than are urban residents. (Comparable figures for children are not available.) It is also important to note that with increasing age weekly contact with children increases more significantly for retirement migrants than for other categories reflecting the fact that some later moves are towards children and that families adapt to the demands of increasing dependence.
Table 4. Contact with relatives by migration history

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sees Weekly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees Grandchild</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monthly</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wishes to see more of grandchildren</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also some differences in terms of community activity. While membership of voluntary organizations is more common among long-term residents and retirement migrants than among middle-aged movers, retirement migrants are less likely to belong to OAP groups and more likely to belong to hobby and historical groups, conservation societies and sports groups. They are also more regular attenders. It is evident that the retirement migrant seeks community integration through voluntary association. Contact and involvement with neighbours is similar for all categories but fewer migrants are involved in religious activity, although thirty per cent had been visited by a clergyman in the six months preceding interview; twice as many as in Hunt’s total sample. Spare time activities were comparable. In comparing migrants with the urban population it appears that although contact with relatives is less community activity is enhanced.

Conclusions

This paper started out to test two hypotheses based on commonly held assumptions; one that availability of and contacts with family are greater in the rural community because the breakdown of the extended family is less advanced and two that somehow the rural areas are a more benign environment for the elderly than urban areas.

First, taking the image of the breakdown of the extended family, due to urbanization, the findings show that the availability of and contact with close kin in the country is very comparable with the town, although the rural young-elderly have less contact with children. However, contact with family is greater for long-term residents – those whom we can assume brought up families in their present area. (The same may be true for urban residents). In other words, taking the rural population as a whole there is little difference in the effectiveness of family structures...
between regions. The important discriminator is geographic mobility of the population and, therefore, within the rural areas considerable differences may be expected between communities and between regions. However, satisfaction with the frequency of contact is greater in the rural areas and this appears to hold for retirement migrants.

Looking at the image of the elderly as alone and isolated, we find that the rural elderly do seem to have greater contact with neighbours, religious institutions and voluntary organizations and to engage in activities which are more likely to bring them into contact with other members of the community and to enhance a feeling of belonging.

It is suggested, therefore, that while family contacts are no more frequent in the country (and in some instances may be less) dependency on family is less and satisfaction with contact higher, as a result of greater involvement and participation in the community resulting in a more autonomous self-image. This is supported by other findings from the study, of a high level of security (i.e. very few are ‘afraid of a lot of things’) and a high tolerance of isolation.14

Studies in the U.S.A. support our findings that friendship and community participation are more important in terms of morale and life satisfaction to elderly people than family15 and that the elderly rely on different sources of support for different services.16 In most rural communities, retirement migrants are a minority of the elderly although all the communities studied would fit Hunt’s13 definition of ‘retirement areas’ having more than seventeen per cent of the population retired. It has been shown that stable, established communities encourage the development and maintenance of friendship and participation whereas new communities or large estates make this more difficult17 and that social integration of the elderly is enhanced where the proportion of the elderly is higher.18

So while the rural environment does not enhance family cohesion in any overall way, rural communities do appear to provide more opportunity for integration and satisfaction for elderly people and appear to reduce dependence on the family, which in turn is reflected in far greater satisfaction with a level of contact comparable to that experienced by the urban elderly.

NOTES


