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## Aging in rural communities: Older persons' narratives of relocating in place to maintain rural identity

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## **Aging in rural communities: Older persons' narratives of relocating in place to maintain rural identity**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Sociological Association's 109th Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.

Aging in rural communities:  
Older persons' narratives of relocating in place to maintain rural identity



*Keywords:* rural aging, aging in place, residential relocation, qualitative analysis

### **Abstract**

Literature often looks at older persons' rural-to-urban moves, but relocation within the same region is less explored. The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of older persons who move to age in town in the same rural setting. Using data from 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with older persons in a rural community and directed content analysis, this study examines these older persons' assessments of their current living situation, still seen as living rurally but now in a more populous location. Although moving within a rural environment, for different reasons, they do not report feelings of being "stuck in place." Rather, older adults interviewed had positive thoughts of earlier life (i.e., in farm settings) while seeing benefits of being "in town" and close to amenities (e.g., activities, services, and family) while still feeling a part of the same rural place. Six themes emerged about the move. "Here and now, I am doing things" revealed the move increased social activities. The "widow's or widower's move" found relocation due to spousal death. Couples moved as their own choice for amenities or fewer house/land-related responsibilities. The "I've always moved around" group saw relocation as a natural part of life. Others moved to be close to family, but it was their own choice. And the last theme showed positive or negative impressions of the farming identity: either "Get me off the farm!" or "Still a farmer at heart." Differences in the experience of transition, sense of insidership, and place-continuity appear in this less-studied group.

The U.S. has seen an increase in rural older populations, and this trend is expected to continue until 2030. Rural areas have a “disproportionate amount” of older people (Glasgow & Brown, 2012, 422). At the same time, researchers suggest rural older populations are particularly under-researched in peer-reviewed published literature, and there is “relatively little critical attention directed towards older people in rural places” (Milbourne, 2012, 316). Literature that does exist suggests two images of rural older persons. Older adults in rural settings are described as having strong, positive community ties and interdependence. Also, rural older persons are described as having a self-identity rooted in the rural setting itself (Davis, Crothers, Grant, Young & Smith, 2012; Keating, Swindle & Fletcher, 2011; Pilgeram & Amos, 2015; Winterton & Warburton, 2011, 2012). This sense of “insiderness” keeps rural older persons tied into the community in which they live (Randall, Clews, & Furlong, 2015; Rowles, 1988); they feel “part of the social fabric” and have a sense of “social cohesion” (Winterton & Warburton, 2011, 189). The meaning of place to rural elders is often a “secure source of identity,” or “a refuge or comfort” (Ponzetti, 2003, 1). This increased level of space-attachment is related to a higher self-described quality of life (Milbourne, 2012). Rural older persons’ strong ties are linked to improved health (Mair & Thivierge-Rikard, 2010).

Older persons in rural settings are also described as having unique concerns. In case studies with rural older persons, researchers found remaining in a rural setting provided the older person with a sense of life satisfaction, thankfulness, security, and hope but also raised concerns about vulnerability, struggle, and being left behind or alone (Davies, 2011; Ness, Hellzen, & Enmarker, 2014). Therefore, the sense of place-based community may be a romanticized notion of quaint “country life” while, in reality, the loss of resources and being bound to a place may make those who age in a rural environment feel marginalized (Dean, Sharkey, Nalty & Xu, 2014; Erickson, Call & Brown, 2012; Goins & Krout, 2006). For example, McMillan Lequieu (2015) found the spouse and adult children of a farmer focusing on more distant stories of happy times on the farm (the father wishing each animal a happy holiday message by name) and not more current, difficult times when their father was living on the farm after being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.

Aging in rural areas is heterogeneous. Rural areas have distinct challenges of service access and changing service availability in changing economic times (Ponzetti, 2003; Milbourne, 2012). Baby Boomers are making retirement moves to some regions, causing rural gentrification which includes increased rents, residential development, and also increased home value. Part of the gentrification included a demand for better health care and pressure put on the housing market when older persons were unable to afford housing (Connell & Dufty-Jones, 2014; Nelson, Nelson & Trautman, 2014). This trend is coupled with increased Latino rural moves. Authors suggest the influx of both new groups sets up a dichotomy of some “wealthy newcomers and longtime locals” (Nelson, Nelson & Trautman, 2014, p. 122). Some suggest rural older persons can be “stuck in place”: remaining in the rural environment not by their own choice or under less-than-optimal conditions (Erickson, Call & Brown, 2012). Torres-Gil and Lam’s Stuck-in-Place (2005) model posits several social identities and “economic-social-racial disparities” (e.g., immigrant status, race, ethnicity, being oldest-old, disability status,

gender, and socio-economic status) that create little “policy advocacy for the disempowered.” Such older persons have “fewer choices and are, therefore, stuck in place” (Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012, 73).

Rural older residents are older and frailer, have limited access to goods and services (such as shopping, healthcare, leisure, and transportation), and often have lower incomes than city-dwelling older persons (Erickson, Call & Brown, 2012; Glasgow & Brown, 2012; Russ, 2012; Zanjani, & Rowles, 2012). Poor health and physical mobility of rural older persons may make rural elders less able to move out of the area, if desired. Two studies used secondary analysis of data to assess health for older persons in rural settings and found differing results. Strohschein (2012) conducted generalized linear models with 2,551 persons 65 years of age or older who were part of the 1994 Canadian National Population Health Survey. Li (2006) conducted logistic regression with 848 adults 65 years of age and older from the 1999 Community and Caregiving Surveys, part of the U.S. National Long Term Care Survey. In Li’s study, only 248, or 29.2% of older persons lived in rural settings. Strohschein (2012) found detrimental health outcomes for older persons who are “involuntary stayers” – those who wish to leave their home or community setting but are unable to do so. As younger generations leave rural areas, older persons are often “left behind” in settings absent of geriatricians and geriatric care (Mattson, 2011). Yet, other research, as with Li’s (2006) study, suggests rural elders may have more, and better quality, services than those aging in more urban areas.

### **Older Adults’ Reasons to Move in the Literature and Definitions of Place**

Many factors have been historically linked to the experience of older persons’ residential moves and relocation. Literature about older adults’ decisions to move, or relocate in general, centers around key premises. Theories posit the move as a mismatch between the older person’s physical environment and the individual’s needs. Lawton and Nahemow’s (1973) ecological model gauges compatibility between the older person’s capabilities (such as functional and cognitive abilities) and physical and social environmental fit. A poor person-environment fit can prompt a move (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973).

Wiseman’s model (1980) introduced motivation to move and choice of new place to live. He described retirement migration and widowhood, or loss of a spouse, as triggering moves. Other theorists found moves can be prompted by an unexpected change in an older person’s daily life or increased service desire and/or need. Lifestyle transitions, such as changes in dependency levels, can trigger residential moves. Litwak and Longino’s (1987) theoretical work suggested changes in individual, family, and societal events can work to prompt retirement, functional decline, and disability-based moves. They suggested amenity moves (at retirement for a better climate or lifestyle) are based on seeking better goods and services, while assistance moves are done to acquire greater levels of care (Litwak & Longino, 1987).

Older persons can be reactive movers (relocating after an event or change in function – such as worsening of health or difficulty in home maintenance (Stimson & McCrea, 2004, 1453). These reactive movers have different outcomes than proactive ones (moves before negative changes occur – such as moving to a smaller or modified

home or closer to healthcare; Kang & Pope, 2010). Older residents may move out of one area to another area to be closer to amenities such as healthcare facilities, community-based services, or family proximity, but integration into this new community may be difficult (Winterton & Warburton, 2011, 190). Researchers also suggest there may be more ambivalence as the oldest old, those 85 years of age or older, move (Löfqvist, Granbom, Himmelsbach, Iwarsson, Oswald & Haak, 2013) and that research is needed about institutional moves (such as those to assisted or skilled care facilities; Perry, Andersen & Kaplan, 2014).

Golant (2015) offers residential normalcy theory, which sees the choice to relocate as a process. Like earlier models of person-environment fit, the older person assesses the way his or her current living situation meets his or her needs and how well he or she can cope with unmet needs in that current setting (Granbom, Himmelsbach, Haak, Löfqvist, Oswald & Iwarsson, 2014). The match or mismatch of need and coping with needs is the catalyst for the move. Other researchers suggest continuity guides an older person's sense of identity as he or she moves. Cutchin (2001) suggests: "the meaning and identity of selfhood and place for elderly persons keeps developing through the struggles of place and the failure or success of making the future experience of place better." He explains, "the elderly should be viewed as intelligent but imperfect actors trying to negotiate with place in varied and creative ways" (p. 41). Erickson and colleagues separated out community satisfaction (as an overall evaluation of the setting) from community attachment (one's actual social ties within the community setting) and found satisfaction was a stronger predictor of moves. But, if place attachment remains important to the older adult, it becomes a key factor in the move and the older person's sense of self (Ayalon & Greed, 2015). Moves, then, become an opportunity to maintain identity but can also alter the way an older person sees himself or herself.

### **Older Adults' Moves in Rural Places**

Renewed emphasis has been placed on understanding aging in rural older environments (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012, Glasgow & Brown, 2012; Hash, Jurkowski & Krout, 2014). Davies warns of the dangers of overly homogenizing the group as "rural older persons" or reducing rural aging to something of a "positivistic demographic trend" (2011, 191). There is the repeat of Graham Rowles's early "quest for phenomenology of rural aging" (1988, 122) to include the often-absent rural voice in the discussion of aging and meaning of place (Bellamy, Bolin & Gamm, 2011).

Another dimension of the inclusion of rural aging in studies is the definition of rurality, itself. While the U.S. Census defines rural as some version of "non-metropolitan," researchers add that though many typologies of what rural might be exist, the lack of universally accepted definitions of rural places is an issue. Being "rural" is self-defined and, therefore, can be tied to a feeling or culture (Glasgow & Brown, 2012; Goins & Krout, 2006; Hash, Jurkowski & Krout, 2014).

As little is known about older persons aging in place rurally, and even less is known about those moving within the same rural environment. Looking at moves within the same state, Lovegreen, Kahana, and Kahana (2010) found these intra-state moves were preferred because of the friendly climate and ability to maintain social bonds.

These networks may not completely keep older persons moving, but they move and remain in the same state. But, intra-state moves are often less studied within the literature. Those who make the decisions to relocate within the same community to live in a less rural part of their community will be referred to, in this article, as aging “in town.” For this study, “in town” can be considered “an urban settlement with a fixed boundary that is smaller than a city” (Allaby & Park, 2013) which is “designed and authorized to perform certain governmental functions on the local level” (Phelps & Lehman, 2005, 64).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the question: how does change of residence within the same community impact an older person’s self-identification as “rural”? Or, how do older persons see rural identity as they change residence - moving from a rural community to town?

### **Method**

Directed narrative content analysis was conducted both to gather themes that emerged in the interview text about the experience of moving to a less rural setting (or “in town”) and also to look for discrepancies or counter narratives about the moving experience. Narrative qualitative methods have a long history in gerontological research and offer a vehicle where older adults can discuss life events (de Medeiros, 2014; Kenyon & Mader, 1999; Perkinson & Solimeo, 2013; Riessman, 1993; Weil, in press). Narrative accounts have been found effective in gathering data from rural persons (Mammen & Sano, 2012; Mentsen, Hellzen, & Enmarker, 2014; Ness, Hellzen & Enmarker, 2014) and are particularly effective in capturing the experience and reality of older rural persons’ lives (Creswell, 2014; Dugan-Day, Dollar & Kaf, 2015; Randall, Clews & Furlong, 2015).

### **Participants and Setting**

The 16 older participants interviewed were from a larger study. In that study, data were collected for 40 persons at least 62 years of age or older living in a community in the Great Plains region of Colorado. Participants (in the larger study) were selected using a convenience sample. The larger study’s purpose was to understand the daily lives and experiences of older persons in the local community. Many participants, in the larger sample, began to talk about their recent moves to town from more rural settings. Selected for analysis were 16 cases whose interview narrative predominantly featured talk about the geographic move.

The county that is the site of the interviews is one of the largest counties in Colorado. It is becoming a retirement destination and has a major Metropolitan Statistical Area, municipalities, and a large rural, agricultural base – especially in the Southern portion of the county. About 20% of the County’s population is rural, with agricultural, farm, or livestock-related work covering two million acres (Upstate Colorado Economic Development, 2014). The local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) found 30% of



the county's persons 60 years of age and older remain in traditional rural settings. At the time of this study, many rural areas were still recovering from natural-disaster conditions of the flood and hail storms of 2013-2014 (State of Colorado, 2014).

Participants were selected using a convenience sample with interviewees attending a local senior center, a senior-center-based academic discussion group, the Retired Senior and Volunteer Program (RSVP), and the general community. Researchers worked with stakeholders at each of these settings to suggest possible participants. Study announcements were sent in an emailed RSVP newsletter. Researchers gave short presentations about the study to senior-center attendees during group meetings and activity sessions. Often, one participant would recommend another, and the sample would snowball.

### **Data Collection**

All participants reviewed and signed Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent forms prior to participation. Older persons were interviewed individually, face-to-face. Each study participant was interviewed at least twice with each interview lasting between 45–90 minutes. Written observational data as notes and memos were recorded. Two interview sessions allowed interviewers, in the second meeting, to return to themes raised in the first interview. To protect confidentiality, all persons are referred to via pseudonyms.

Interview teams used an interview script or guide to conduct the interviews. Each interviewer, a gerontology student or faculty, was trained to use the interview script and to record participants' responses in the same manner. The interview guide's five initial questions asked about demographic status and family history. Examples of the remaining 12 open-ended questions include: "Tell me about a typical day" and "What are some of your experiences of aging?". The interview schedule/guide is available from the author by permission. To address consistency in coding, or inter-coder agreement, training included formal training sessions about interviewing older people, doing ethnographic and observational research, and mock interviewing and role playing.

According to Cohen and Crabtree's "Qualitative Research Guidelines Project" (2013), an open-ended interview type is beneficial when you have more than one interviewer in the field. They find: "The semi-structured interview guide provides a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data . . . The inclusion of open-ended questions and training of interviewers to follow relevant topics that may stray from the interview guide does, however, still provide the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2013, Paragraph 2). The benefits of the semi-structured schedule are having the "interviewer prepared and appear competent during the interview," giving "informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms," and "providing reliable, comparable qualitative data" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2013, Paragraph 2).

## **Data Management and Analysis**

### **Coding and Analysis**

Directed content analysis is the process of identifying areas of interest as *a priori* categories (e.g., demographic status and family history/social support; daily activities and health; programs and services, and the experience of aging) developed from theory. Written text for each of the open-ended questions in each of these categories was transcribed and used in analysis. Demographic data were entered into a database created in SPSS and summarized with descriptive statistics.

The analysis process for the remaining questions in the interview guide consisted of reviewing the narratives gathered from the open-ended textual data. Categories, or codes, were used to organize themes in the data. Categories arose in two ways. They were drawn from sections of the narrative that included the greatest amount of discussion about the experience of moving. Categories were also drawn from parts of the interview text highlighted as the most important by the interviewees. From these codes, themes about reasons for moving within the same rural setting emerged.

After the themes were developed, all 16 transcripts were reviewed in their entirety of 375 pages of single-spaced text. The narrative from an interviewee's experience was then used to provide greater depth of a theme or to serve as case study to provide greater insight for each of the 5 emergent themes.

### **Rigor: Addressing the Elements of Trustworthiness**

As is common in qualitative analysis, several methods were used to strengthen credibility (or accuracy of findings; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, in addition to the initial coder, we employed the feedback of some participants as a way of member checking as part of the thematic findings. Themes were presented to participants after initial interviews, so they could provide feedback. In terms of transferability, participants' own words are provided for the reader's interpretation. It is up to the reader and other researchers to assess the applicability of our findings to their settings (Merriam, 2009).

Several techniques were employed to enhance dependability, meaning that the findings originated from the data and not the coder's preconceived ideas. An on-going audit trail was kept describing how data were collected and how codes and themes were created, while notes were taken on how decisions were made throughout the research process. Using an audit trail also helped to address confirmability and to ensure that this study's findings were shaped by the data from participants and not our researchers' views.

## **Findings**

### **Demographic characteristics**

Interviewees were mostly women (69%), and married (75%). Their average age was 73.5 years of age (ranging from 62 to 89). A typical interviewee had 5 siblings, 4 children, and 3 grandchildren. All self-identified as "rural" dwellers. Interviewees had a

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wide range of geographic locations as birthplaces. Eleven birth states were represented with the two most common (outside of Colorado) as Kansas and Illinois. The group had completed high levels of formal education, most commonly some college, with many persons completing college degrees. As a proxy for income, most had Medicare and additional private insurance for healthcare. See Table 1 for a description of participants.

**Table 1. Description of Participants by Pseudonym**

Participants	Demographic Characteristics	Reason for Move
Ann	78-year-old woman	A Widow's or Widower's Move
Ed	78-year-old man	Get Me Off the Farm! or, Still a Farmer at Heart
Emmett	70-year old man	A Widow's or Widower's Move
Eric	82-year-old man	Relocation in Part of Life
Jim	81-year old man	Relocation in Part of Life
Lina	82-year-old woman	Move to be with Family by Choice
Louise	63-year-old woman	Move to be with Family by Choice
Marie	62-year-old woman	Get Me Off the Farm! or, Still a Farmer at Heart
Molly	71 year-old woman	Couples Moved as Their Own Choice
Paul	89-year-old man	Couples Moved as Their Own Choice
Rita	81-year old woman	A Widow's or Widower's Move
Sandra	86-year-old woman	Relocation is Part of Life
Sandy	69-year old woman	A Widow's or Widower's Move
Sarah	83-year old woman	Couples Moved as Their Own Choice
Sophie	84-year old woman	Get Me Off the Farm! or, Still a Farmer at Heart
Suzie	86-year-old woman	Relocation is Part of Life

### **Reasons for Relocation and “the Move”**

Six themes emerged from the interview text as reasons for the move from a rural to an in-town setting. The move increased social activities, or some moved as they became a widow or widower, or couples moved as a planned, mutual choice for amenities or less house/land-related responsibilities. Others saw relocation as natural part of life and moved around throughout their lives. Some moved to be close to family, but relocation was their own choice. And the last theme showed the move in relation to positive or negative impressions of the “farmer” identity: the urge to leave the farm or keep the farmer identity.

### **“Here and now, I am doing things:” narratives of “Active Aging” in the new setting.**

This first theme reflects the current state of rural older persons who have moved into a town setting and see the move as a way to do new things that are not related to prior work in a rural setting or on a farm. Much of the narrative of this group talks about being active or “doing things” in the new place. For this group, a pleasure with the ability to increase current activities of leisure, by choice, filled the text. While the theme of being active has ties to the individuals’ early lives on the farm (doing chores, tending for animals, etc.), these new activities were mentioned as ones of choice and recreation. There was a conscious effort to express the activities as a continuation of meaningful, self-selected work and not “play” – which the interviewees thought of as more trivial. Yet, many activities followed the themes of doing work and helping others. A large portion of the narratives in this first theme tended to focus on descriptions of the interviewees’ multiple and varied daily and weekly experiences and the value they found in these activities. It is not the most detailed theme, but it shows the value each person places on his or her daily routine in his or her new locale.

Three cases of older persons, across several age ranges, illustrate the activity-based or “productive aging” themes in the narratives. An older person in this group reported a combination of each of these top five activities [this is more than five] every day: doing volunteer work or service to others, reading, meeting with friends, doing housework, exercising, praying, cooking, visiting a senior center, and working in a paid position close behind. A typical week included a combination of these same typical daily activities but added a few others such as taking walks and reading. While each person mentioned some activities tied to leisure, they were careful to also include ones they deemed of value or contribution to society.

Louise (a pseudonym) is a 63-year-old and retired registered nurse. She and her five siblings:

grew up on a farm in Wisconsin and with both parents as farmers... [She describes her new daily routine], I go to the senior center to play bingo and am a huge fan [of a local baseball team], so I go to as many games as I can. I am completely loyal to my team. I am a hospice volunteer and volunteer at [two other non-profit agencies]. This way I make use of my nursing profession. I likes being

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alone in my new place [since] I am closer to my family and happy about seeing my children succeed.

In her narrative, Louise is quick to point out – she balances this fun in her new activities with more serious work.

Another woman, Suzie, 86, is a former school teacher with three daughters (in their fifties and sixties) and four grandchildren. She taught grades K-12 in a one-room country school house during the war and felt moving was “not a big deal.” She had moved to town after she married earlier in her life and has lived in a couple of non-city settings from the time she left the cattle farm in South Dakota until now. She describes her typical week. It consists of exercise class three times a week at the senior center, something she chooses to do for herself. She also stressed her role in volunteering at a non-profit agency and her church, driving around and doing errands for people who cannot drive, and visiting different friends almost every day (even though her “three best friends have passed away”). She states “she still has a lot of friends and things to do.”

A second retired teacher, Jim who is 81, born in Arizona and the son of a minister, talks about his “Monday-Wednesday-Friday routine of swimming.” He likes to eat at local restaurants with his wife as his form of leisure. He also visits local museums and exercises at a public fitness center. To maintain his connection with his teaching identity, he attends a retired academic senior group. To show his commitment to service and helping others, he helps cook at the senior center.

Balancing the personal enjoyment in the new in-town setting with a sense of seriousness and commitment to giving back or being of service to others arose in the text of these interviews. The idea, that though the setting had changed, the duty to doing things of merit and being active, persisted. Rural identity was not lost, but the key, or valued, elements of each person’s identity were kept and expanded upon by testing new activities (while keeping some existing ones) in the new, less rural place.

### **A widow’s or widower’s move: relocation due to spousal death.**

This second theme reflects more traditional reasons for moving from a rural setting to town setting, namely relocation after the death of a spouse or partner. For this group, two factors that shape identity are changing at the same time – their relationship status and geographic area. A move after this type of loss can impact a man or woman’s sense of self-identity and internal definition/sense of self– since relationship and physical place help define who a person is. Three women and one man discussed their decision to “move to town” to seek less land or open space after the death of a longtime spouse, each married more than 45 years.

Ann is a 78-year-old White woman born in “small-town Oklahoma” with the entire family, including her 12 siblings, working on the family farm. She talked about her dad being a farmer “growing broom corn on 9,000 acres.” She said she liked the farm and outdoors so much that she even worked on some farms after that. But, her husband’s health began to deteriorate. After her husband’s heart attack and death, she chose to retire in “the city” with “her granddogs and pension” from past work in a large chain clothing store.

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Rita, 81, is the widow of a surgeon. She proudly shared that she was born on a dairy farm, one of the first with the first pasteurized milk in her county of birth, in a neighboring state to Colorado. Her husband was born in a rural town in [the county she lives now] of 190 people. She “came to town” 10 years ago when her spouse died, and she now has a “life of service and politics.” Rita is very active in both religious and service-based circles and is known for donating her time to help others. An accident made her husband unable to care for himself. Rita said she wanted to be in a place with similar values and felt connected to the county and the freedom a smaller place with close neighbors could offer her. Her current place matches her “loss of functionality.” She explains, “where I live now is not much different from where we lived” [when her husband was alive]... This type of residence is called a “patio home,” or term used to describe a one-story, single-family dwelling, built in groups with a Home Owner’s Association (HOA) fee attached. These homes are marketed as having separated yards for pets and no neighbors living above or alongside as in a townhome setting. The HOA fees cover outside maintenance and repair for tasks such as gardening and snow removal (see PR Newswire, 2008). But, these homes are not explicitly built as retirement communities, and they do not have age-restrictions. When asked about her reasons for choosing her current patio home and in-town location. Rita explained:

[Unfortunately] the houses are closer together, but closer to shopping and friends also being close to [access to a major highway] I take to visit my family in [a neighboring state]. The house is close to places I go [like her Church] where I do service, and the community has beautiful landscaping and tight-knit neighbors that I respect very much.”

Sandy, 69, is a case study of this theme. She describes herself as “Caucasian, Native American, and Dutch.” She is the most recently widowed of the group. She was widowed and moved within the last year at the time of the interviews. She has a master’s degree and created a nonprofit organization that helps local families. Sandy grew up in Kansas, where her dad bought a farm with five acres of land. He sold seed to help her get through college. At 21, Sandy married Tom, and he worked for the same company for 30 years. When his job became more administrative, they ended up in Colorado. They were married for 50 years until Tom died of cancer. Before Tom’s death, they had lived on a farm with almost 75 acres of land. But, upon Tom’s passing, Sandy moved to town. To her, this is a double loss. She confided that while the “in town situation” is new to her, she still “dislikes leaving the farm and often misses it . . .” but did not feel she could take on the responsibility of the farm alone:

I got married and moved to a small town of about 300 people and we had a farm with horses and had other animals, too. After my spouse died I knew I couldn't live on the farm anymore. I didn't do the outside work. I did the inside work. I talked to my eldest son, and he wanted me to live in community near him [in another state]. I didn't want to live in that community. I decided that I knew [this town where she currently lives], and I wanted to move here. Although it's a near a larger [metropolitan] area, it still feels like a town. And, it still feels like the same

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kind of community. It's relaxed and quiet. I knew people and when an apartment became available, they contacted me, and I and I moved.

I still feel it's the same place, I know where things are, I know the community. I didn't want to go far into another state like [names state]. I had been in this area for a good part of my life, so it's I knew where wanted to live in. I have a good network of people here, and I do volunteer work, I'm involved in organizations.

When I moved here, it was less developed, the rents are going up and up now. It was more like country then. So, even the time that you move does matter and has an impact. My kids were very supportive in the move. Actually, I sold some land off and then sold the farm. That sale let me finance the move – but I know some people who cannot afford it and live in trailers, so, really, I feel happy here.

Emmett, 70, the one widower who moved to town, had a different view of the “widower’s move” experience. Unlike the three prior widows’ accounts, he had found a new partner after the move. He spoke about his early years. He took his “growing up on a farm with good skills,” married young, and worked in construction. He transferred farm skills to what he refers to as “less backbreaking work.” He visited Colorado in the 1970s for a vacation and then moved his family there in a more rural plot of land. He spent family-time traveling around with his wife and kids in his Recreational Vehicle (RV). His expression of grief in the loss of his “beloved wife” echoed that of the women’s accounts. Emmett expressed:

My wife dying a few years ago was one of the hardest things I have ever had to deal with, after almost 50 years. It was particularly difficult because we had both retired early so we could travel to Valley of the Gods [in Utah, and he names other local sites in the mountains and desert]. After the death of my wife, times were tough – I had to learn to cook and clean and realized all the ways I relied on my wife.

The interviewer’s notes stated the more he discussed his wife, the more upset he became and wanted to change the subject. He changed the conversation and spoke about the center as his “favorite hangout” where he has established a “coffee club with the other guys” who are also center members. During the second interview, Emmett preferred to talk about the new person and love interest he has met in town, their dating, and how they met at the senior center.

Each narrative expressed the suffering of spousal loss. Each also showed how – while a long-held marital role changes – having a connection to the same/similar community can help maintain the sense of identity that is tied to a specific rural place.

### **Couples moved as their own choice.**

Unlike persons in the prior group, older persons in this group had made the choice to move based on self-perceived changes in needs or as proactive movers, choosing to move before any changes made a move more necessary or urgent. Two

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couples' narratives make up this group. Each couple sought out a new place to live that offered them more services or amenities. These cases reflect how the choice to make the move and the move related to the person's sense of maintaining a rural identity.

Molly, a 71-year-old woman, was born in Kansas and holds a master's degree. She is currently married and talked a lot about her daily visits with her friends. She said she likes to keep friends and "has friends from every stage in her life, all the way back to kindergarten." She and her husband are "financially comfortable, [with] money outside of Social Security and have investments." Molly said she "does not see how people could live on just government funding alone." When talking about her life owning a farm, she stated that "that is a past life, owning a farm; that part of our lives [she and her husband's] is over." Instead, she volunteers herself and her husband (she "volunteers him a lot") for activities in their apartment complex and Church – while they also keep a land in the mountains if they want to get away from "the city" for a weekend. Interviewer's notes state that this was not a negative or harsh statement and that her comments reflected more of a change or transition in living situation. Molly explains:

Moving down from the farm and 250 acres and I gave up my beautiful gardens and acres of land. People, who bought it today do not keep it up. People ask me if I missed it, but I tell them "no" because it's just a change of life. I've always moved [she states one city and one town and one rural setting]... and feel that I'm in the new place, there's a sense of community. We left the farm. It was an awful lot of work because the energy level changes, you can't do it you wished to. Of course, the kids don't want to take it over so the kids want to do different things they don't want to be farmers, and that's okay. And then even the relatives didn't want to take it over, they wouldn't want to do [farm work] as well. There comes a time when you do things differently, you don't want to live in the same way that you did. The next generations did not want to run it, and there was no one else. But, when I did it [ran the farm], I absolutely loved it.

Sarah, 83, a former "Army brat" and community-college adjunct, and her 89-year old husband, Paul, decided to move to a home "with less upkeep." Sarah said she saw changes in her Instrumental Activities Daily Living (IADLs) and could not "clean the floor on her hands and knees." She and her husband opted for "condo where there is less work for Paul, to keep up with . . . in terms of outside maintenance." She discussed how her "patio home" made their lives easier.

Both couples' themes reflect the move as conscious choice, not a loss. The move has benefits (such as less upkeep, maintenance, or size) and offers a sense of freedom to pursue activities of interest. Each couple moved within 50 miles of their prior rural residence and, in the case of the first couple, still visited a similar region as a "getaway."

### **"I've always moved around:" relocation is simply part of life.**

For some older persons interviewed, relocation was simply a part of their lives, and they expressed an affinity for moving and adapting in each new setting. For this theme, men spoke about the moves and identity mostly in terms of activities related to



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the move, while the woman in this group discussed her feelings about it. Each person did not see the move as negatively affecting his or her identity. Each spoke about moving as a constant in his or her life.

Eric, an 82-year-old, married “American male,” spoke about his life “on the move.” His “papa was a railroader and worked in the oil business, traveling all over for work” and Eric, himself, moved around a lot as part of the military and a “soldier’s life.” Since he had often relocated, his move to town was, to him, seen as “just another move.” Eric was born in what he describes as a “poor, rural county.” After the war he moved around. He expressed that he “misses his children and I do not see them.” He sadly states he has “lost contact with one daughter, and I only have acquaintances, my grandchildren are not close.” Eric talked about the beauty of the where place he lives and of being able to “sit on a mountain and watch the sun rise.”

Like Eric, 81-year-old Jim was in the Navy and decided to retire to a rural town in Colorado with his wife since they loved the state and climate. Jim, a retired teacher, explained how felt moving, this time, to town:

Even when I lived [in another setting, outside of town], I knew many people that came to town from outside of town [the rural regions] for things like medical care, visiting family, shopping, and entertainment. I see some of them at the center and some at restaurants now. So, there’s no big deal, I didn’t have to meet *all* new people.

Sandra, an 86-year-old retired university professor, “always moved around,” too. She was born on a farm, as the first generation of her family of Nordic descent to be born in the U.S. She said her “father sold farm tools” and then, during the depression, worked for a bank, “eventually selling entire farms.” She moved to complete her degrees and as part of her academic life. Sandra stated: “Being single without kids, by my own choice, I have no issue living in town close to [my Church] and volunteer work.”

These narratives show how identity remains tied to people who move and travel across a number of places. Though some had lived many places in the course of their lives, each settled back into a community that he or she defined as rural. A community that has the characteristics they associate with growing up or how they define themselves as people.

### **Moving to be with family as one’s own choice.**

Just as prior couples’ narratives focused on moving before the need exists (as proactive movers) or moving for amenities (closer to services), this group moved closer to be near family. These women’s narratives best illustrate family-based moves. While each has a different reason prompting the move to town – such as leaving the farm that became too much work, to live near sons, moving to be with grandchildren, and connecting to the rural community via social media accounts linked to friends – each felt the realness or consistency of her rural identity remained intact.

Louise, 63, a retired registered nurse, grew up in Wisconsin with her parents owning a dairy farm that had been “passed down from generations.” She was asked

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about her feelings about growing up on a farm, to describe the community she lived in before moving to this one, and to describe where she currently lives:

Interviewer: Tell me about the transition from where you came from to here, where you live now...

Louise: I didn't know any different...I grew up in a small town on a farm there were 17 people in my graduating class, and we rented a farm we didn't own. You know rural places are different here [in the Central Plains] – very different than other places – what people grow and how people live is different. [In her home state] farming was more vegetables than animals.

Louise continued on that she “lived on a ranch, did chores,” and expressed being very close to her family and Church. She sometimes helped raise her siblings and, upon the death of her grandmother, then parents, she married and moved to a less rural area. Her husband worked on a farm and in a factory (she has, too), and she moved back to her rural town on and off to care for relatives as needed. She “raised chickens, pigs, cows, and grew hay, oats, and corn” and was “always chosen to gather the cows from the forest with her brother.” She ended up selling the farm because “it was too much work to do with her other jobs.” She decided to move to this town now “to follow her two (adult) sons,” their families (her grandchildren), and her sisters. She:

enjoys the independence of being in town and having a social life rather than caring for family. This way, I am independent, don't have to work and can enjoy my grandchildren – also my family and sisters and spend time with them. I chose to stay near my family who live throughout the region – so I can babysit my great-grandchildren. My health is good, but I enjoy the safety and convenience of my “55+” housing.

Lina, an 82-year-old retired elementary teacher, moved four times with her young children, in all rural settings. She describes her moves:

The biggest town [in the series of moves] had about 3,000 people. I met my husband in high school, and we loved this community and land. I knew practically everyone in my small town - actually 7 sisters married 7 brothers. Just like the show. We had to travel to town for supplies and in town. There were 10 little houses, a grocery store and post office, and we felt related to everyone. My aunts and uncles married people in the town, and we were one big family. The loss of my parents forced to take responsibility as an older generation in the family... and moving became harder because I was married and had a child at a young age. When my husband became ill and needed more support, I made the decision to move to a [this particular] smaller rural town because of its proximity to family and the way it is a good size for daily travel and is affordable to live in.

Her new community base, instead of “friends from high school,” now includes her faith community. But she feels she has two communities back home and in her new place.

She has moved to be with her daughter and grandchild in this town. Yet, she points out that she actively maintains social media accounts as a “way for me to connect with people again.”

Both women reflect very favorably about their rural roots and are also satisfied with the move to town to be near family. This theme involves the “best of both worlds idea” – connected to community while living in independent housing and more affordable or comfortable settings.

### **“Get Me Off the Farm!” or, “Still a Farmer at Heart.”**

The last group of narratives’ focus is those that had the strongest reaction to being from a farm, or rural community. The three narratives in this group offer very different views of leaving life on a farm and moving to town. The first account reflects a need to distance oneself from a rural or farming identity. The remaining two accounts show persons reflecting about being rural in a positive way with one wishing to reconnect to life on the farm and one feeling very strongly connected to the land – maintaining that connection in a daily but on a smaller scale.

Marie, a 62-year-old retired social worker who “wanted to save the world – that’s why [she] choose a social-work profession,” had moved to Colorado after she was married. Marie was born on a farm in Iowa, as 1 of 14 siblings, and always “hated the idea of being labeled a ‘farm girl.’” She said this title was definitely “not a compliment” and that, in her view, this was a very negative stereotype or label to be called. People “made fun of my hand-me-down, homemade clothes and told me I smelled like my farm animals.” So she left the farm for college, when she was in her early twenties, to try to shake off what she saw as a negative label earlier in life. She always lived in a more-rural-than-not setting and now in town, she is “adjusting to retirement” and plays a regular card game with a friend-group and admits she still honestly “loves the outdoors, walking, hiking, and the like.”

Unlike Marie, who wanted off the farm as soon as possible, others left the physical farm but still kept and strongly identified with the “farming” identity. Sophie, an 84-year-old widow from Kansas, now lives in Colorado. When asked, “Would you want to live on a farm again, if you had the chance?” replied “Yes, it’s my ultimate goal in life. I will always be a country girl, in my heart.” Sophie told interviewers with great pride that:

My father was a farmer; he ran his farm well. Family milk cows, and some for meat and milk. My responsibility was for the cows. Farm life taught me responsibility, and everyone had a job to do. Growing up on a farm was great! Growing up on a farm. Fun! As you look back on those years, you pick up a lot of things. I learned that you really need to depend on your family. The men in my family were a very important part of the farm flourishing.

The interviewer’s notes stated this was the most engaged and talkative Sophie had been during the entire interview process. The notes read: “From the way Sophie spoke about the farm and growing up with her brothers, it seemed a big part of her life. Telling stories about the farm and those memories seemed enjoyable for her. It

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sounded as if she remembered that part of her life very fondly. She seemed less excited to speak about some parts of her life as an adult.” For example, she mentioned she was a widow left with very little money. She has had surgery for an ongoing chronic condition and currently must work to make ends meet. She noted “I have worked past the age where many people retire.” But, she looks forward to going to work every day and improving the lives of people. When she was first in school, she “thought I wanted to be a nurse. I had a family. I worked 35 years to support my family. I go down to the senior center and have coffee with my friends. I hate to feel isolated and alone. They make me feel like I have to go. It’s like a family away from my actual family.” In terms of her connection with her farming roots, Sophie works in a food-based industry and is happy to use as much local, fresh food as possible.

Like Sophie, Ed, a 78-year-old, married man, still speaks about missing the farm. Ed explained he “still gets out to the farm on occasion.” He tells the interviewer that he is the child of dairy farmers:

My family had cows and chickens and farmed several crops. Now retired, I still work with another friend on [a smaller part of] my old farm to grow some wheat and hay. I was always very satisfied with life because I didn’t know anything different. My family grew anything cows eat – sugar beets were the cash crop. I even traded eggs for supplies, shipped milk to [a top dairy distributor] and my last year of running the farm got the highest price for alfalfa bales and wheat with higher protein content than anyone else’s.

Ed felt that he “enjoyed raising cows as a kid and should have gone into dairy farming. He has had many physical jobs – including work as a meat packer skinning 150 cows, but after two open-heart surgeries, he moved into town. He stated it feels good to get out and do some farming as he ages. He attends the senior center and his Church. When asked if he was satisfied with these changes in his life, Ed said: “You got to be satisfied with what you do, even if you’re digging ditches. If that’s what you like, then it’s satisfying. I like the smell of dirt in the field. I take pride in raising the best wheat in the neighborhood, because I take care of the land.” He eats congregate meals at the senior center, his wife helps with the driving and errands, and they have a “cleaning lady” to help with housework- but is still connected to the farming identity. But, he states that he “hates the assumption that with age you can’t do things.”

The profound impact of the farming identity (both positive and negative) is clear. For some interviewed it was something to shake off and lose (e.g., when one left for college), but for others it was an identity they wore with pride for longer periods of their lives – whether on the farm or living in a rural community.

### Discussion

As Pilgeram and Amos (2015) suggest, qualitative work can add to the body of literature about rural settings. The narratives in this study explored the daily, lived experience of 16 persons aged 62-89 now living in town having moved from more rural settings and roots. While aging-in-place transitions often look at those moving from a setting into a retirement community (Stimson & McCrea, 2004) or the experiences of the oldest old as they relocate (Löfqvist, Granbom, Himmelsbach, Iwarsson, Oswald & Haak 2013), this study looked at a group that relocated within the same demographic region—moving from a rural farm to a more rural town or city-like setting. After the move, this group still remains dwelling in the community in their own apartments or homes – not in a retirement community or assisted-living facility. This study group differs from the “involuntary stayers” (those remaining or left behind in an unfavorable setting) as described by Strohschein (2012). The six themes reflect what Mc Millan Lequieu describe as rural persons “using narratives where actors try to link the past and present lines of action” to maintain an identity (2015, 41). Older persons in this study felt they kept place continuity within the same geographic region (Ayalon & Greed, 2015; Lovegreen, Kahana & Kahana, 2010). The older persons interviewed demonstrate what Hash, Jurkowski and Krout (2014) call “cultural ruralness” or having a rural identity that is tied to behaviors or feelings and not only one, specific geographic place.

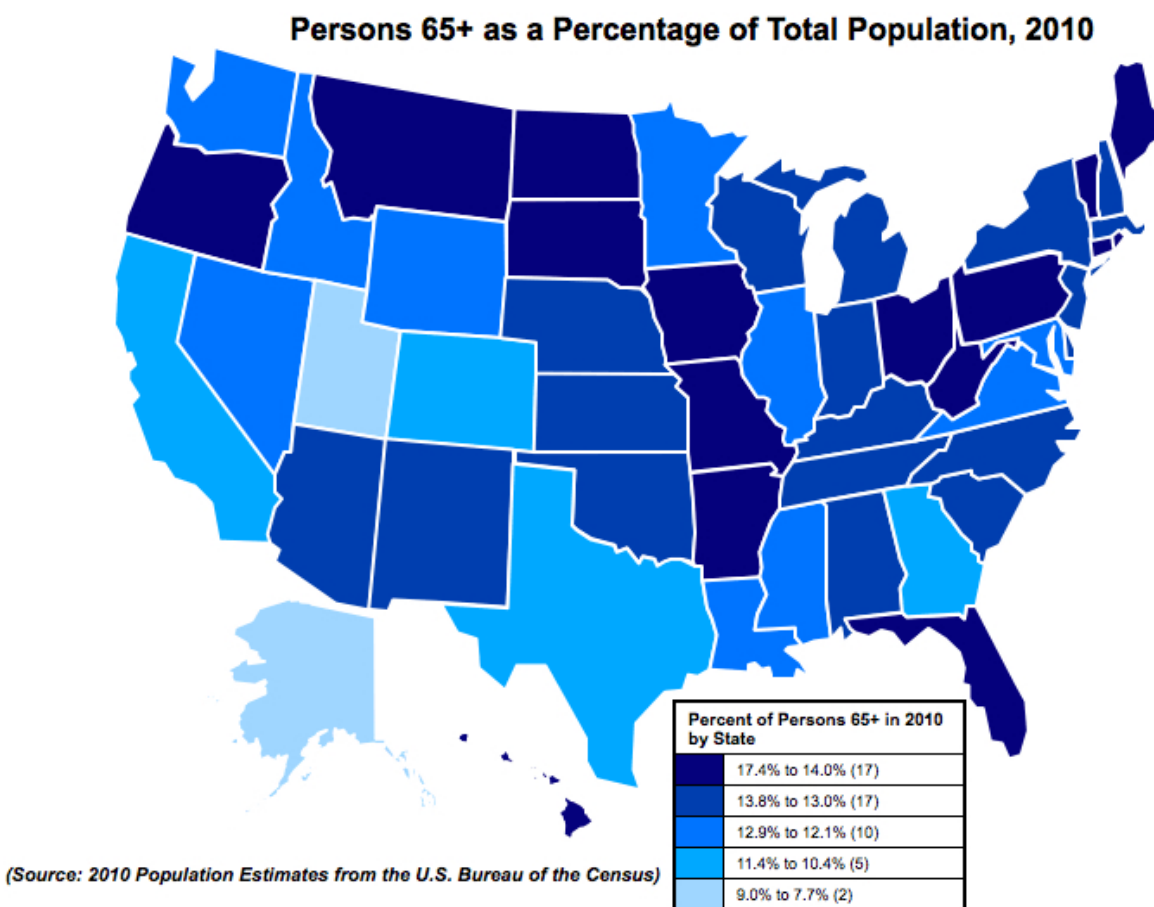
Findings from this group strongly support Cutchin’s idea of older persons reconstructing identity as a fluid process across moves and physical boundaries. Findings of wanting to remain in the same community (“just closer to town”) can support the idea of the older persons in this study wanting to age in a general regional “place” as seen in the more general aging-in-place literature. This sameness keeps their rural identity intact. The persons interviewed in this study also spoke frequently about their “activeness” in aging within their new community settings, holding fast to cultural scripts of productive aging. The talk of being enmeshed in these new settings in a familiar rural backdrop may suggest an attempt to maintain community connectedness or connectedness to place (Davis, Crothers, Grant, Young & Smith 2012). But, for this group, a unique feature is that sense of place is not necessarily solely tied to a particular, individual “home” or house but a general sense of an area or local community in the broader sense. Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, and Allen (2012) suggest that more goes into the decision to remain in one’s community than just attachment to a particular physical home or house. But, as the present study found, little research is conducted about rural older persons, with even less work done with rural older persons who move around within a particular rural setting. Older persons, in this study, have an expanded sense of attachment to place as a region or lifestyle (see Cutchin 2003).

Some of the experiences, such as the move of the three widows and one widower after the death of a spouse, follow traditional patterns of older persons’ residential moves (Chevan, 1995). Person-environment fit and mismatch impacted older persons in this study’s choice to move, as did the need for services or being prompted by a major life change (loss of a spouse or illness). Moves also reflected the desire for more amenities. Yet, the majority of the other older persons’ experiences differ from the literature’s reported norms for rural older persons. Those in this study had high levels of education, some ties to the self-described sense of community of rural settings, and no

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great deficiencies in physical and cognitive health or mobility. They would not self-define as being “stuck in place” (Torres-Gil & Lam, 2011), nor would they be seen as expressing a sense of marginalization (Erickson, Call & Brown, 2012; Goins & Krout, 2006).

This study’s findings support work done by Cutchin (2003), Menec, Means, Keating, Parkhurst and Eales (2011), Golant (2008), and others that propose the one-size-fits-all model of aging in place for all places does not exist; rather, there is much more complexity in the way people and (regional) place interact in the process. In this study, the finding that older persons were satisfied to remain in a rural community setting (even one in town without, in some cases, pre-existing, direct social ties) echoes the work of Erickson and colleagues’ structural equation-modeling analysis that separates out community satisfaction (as an overall evaluation of the setting) from community attachment (one’s actual social ties within the community setting). As Oswald, Jopp, Rott, and Wahl (2011) found, an older person’s well-being is closely tied to many intricate assessments of both the immediate (home) and environmental (community) settings.



As it is becoming more common for older residents now living in city-like locations to have earlier life experiences growing up on farms or in farming communities, this study supports moving beyond stereotypical views of rural older persons as all favoring the farm and nostalgic farm life. This study seeks to begin a

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dialogue and line of research that includes more direct work with a variety of rural older persons in diverse rural settings. That said, as an exploratory work, it is not the intention of this study to be transferrable to all rural older persons in all rural settings. Older persons with different demographic characteristics (such as education, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, income, pension, or health statuses), for example, can have different experiences when aging in rural settings. Additionally, all older persons did not move to town during the same timeframe or directly from farm to town. But, all interviewees are currently living within the same town setting. As these findings were part of a larger study, more narrative accounts of older persons aging in place across rural settings and additional research with more groups of rural older persons would be warranted.

The findings of this study contribute to the literature by reinforcing the idea that transitions of older persons' living settings are less standard or linear and more individualistic. This study examined a group of rural older persons who seek to remain in what they see as the same rural setting – just closer to town. Therefore, light is shed upon a lesser-known phenomenon of the relocation experiences of rural older persons. As the present study found, rural identity is not tied to one specific place (such as only one specific home or farm); it is linked to many residential transitions within what the older person considers the same community. For some, the connecting to place means maintaining connections to people. For others, the connection is the land, and for others, it is a “virtual,” social media-based connection. Moving with the community to a less rural, but similar, environment lets older persons maintain connections to place and a rural identity. Older persons moved for a variety of reasons (for more activities, loss of a spouse, proactive choice, to be closer to family, and to remain/or lose connection to the farm). No matter the reason for the move, the sense of being rural and tied to the rural setting, moves with the person.



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