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Lifelong Learning in the County: A Context of Nature, Community, and Simplicity

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The purpose of this study was to understand more about the impact of living in a rural area on personal learning with older adults. This is important to consider because of the higher concentration of older adults in rural areas. This qualitative research was based on twenty interviews with older adults. All of the participants lived in the same rural county in south Georgia (USA). One of the results from this research was the positive description of living in a rural area. Despite literature that often describes rural areas in a negative light; all of the participants spoke about the positive aspect of living in a rural area. These positive characteristics were discussed as simplicity, quiet, community, and nature. Negative aspects of rural life were mentioned as lack of resources and fewer people. Ten participants were purposefully chosen who were identified as active older adults who continue to learn. Two interviews with each person were conducted and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The findings were based on recurring themes as a result of comparative analysis throughout the process. Public schools can contribute to the continued education of older adults by holding various classes as well as incorporating volunteerism

The increasing influence of older Americans as well as the imminent aging of 80 million “Baby Boomers” is causing many segments of western society to re-evaluate the concept of “old age.” Medical advances and personal lifestyles have resulted in older adults living longer and healthier lives (Fries, 1990; Haskell, 1994; Haskell & Phillips, 1995). Self-directed learning has an integral role in adult development as each change and adjustment in one’s life often becomes the impetus for learning (Lamdin, 1997). In addition, education and especially self-directed learning has been positively related to higher satisfaction of life in older adults (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Self-directed learning is the primary way that adults learn (Knowles, 1984). The complicated late-life adjustments of older adults provide opportunities for self-directed learning projects.

Researchers often sidestep rural populations by filling samples from nearby towns and university communities. However, rural older populations are important to consider because there are a higher percentage of older adults in rural areas (Quadagno, 1999). This particular study will consider how living in a rural area affects personal learning. Research suggests those who reside in non-metropolitan areas have a strong sense of community, self-reliance, and harmony with nature (Hill & Moore, 2000). Leean’s (1981) extensive research in a rural area pointed out how pastoral settings can positively influence learning. Her study pointed out the value of a rural context on adult learning, a setting where inhabitants live close to nature, depend on each other, learn by doing, and have time and quiet for reflection.

The purpose of this study was to understand how older, rural adults utilize self-directed learning in the adjustments and changes in late-life. Self-directed learning (SDL) can be described as learning that is self-initiated, personal, and intentional. This learning is evident in individual systematically planned learning projects as well as in on-going personal interests (Lamdin, 1997). Although SDL can begin unintentionally, from happenstance or even a required

class, the defining characteristic of SDL is that the person eventually takes charge of his or her own learning (Carre, 2000). Lamdin, who researched learning of older adults or Elderlearning, states “The important thing is that these projects are ‘owned’ by the learner who is in control of what is learned, when the learning starts, where it goes, and when it is complete” (p. 118).

This research is an affirmation that learning is not the exclusive domain of formal schooling; that our post-industrial, post-modern society has over simplified and de-emphasized the rural lifeworld; and that older adults continue to learn in unique and creative ways. In essence, this article discusses the value of self-directed learning in the unique situation of rural older adults. Its implications however can be made for any educator and with all ages.

Relevant Literature

This literature review will outline pertinent research on rural life as well as self-directed learning. Although there has been some writing on rural older adults (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991), the majority of research is focused on samples from cities and university towns (Jensen, 1999; Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Lamdin, 1997) or senior centers (Brockett, 1985, 1987; Cusack, 1996; Long & Smith, 1989; Neikrug et al. 1995; Pevoto, 1989; Yamanda, 1994). In addition there is a lack of recognition of the positive impact of life in a rural community on personal learning from various writers (Walzer & Sutton, 2001).

Definitions of rural and urban are often debated and refined by various authors (Quadagno, 1999). These definitions often depend on the point the writer is trying to make. Varieties of definitions of rural can confuse the issue. For example, there were 8 million older adults that lived in rural areas in the USA in 1996. Rural had various definitions from metropolitan-rural-farm to nonmetropolitan-rural-nonfarm (Krout & Coward, 1998). In

addition, the demarcations between urban and rural are becoming more and more blurred. Improved transportation, technology, communications, expanding urban areas, television and radio, as well as Internet use are also having a significant impact on the definition of rural (Hill & Moore, 2000).

The rural population may be more resourceful than people who dwell in cities or urban areas. Residents who live in small towns may depend on themselves and one another to provide learning or entertainment (McLaughlin & Jensen, 1998). This creativity, innovation, and personal resourcefulness are more evident when resources are not available. For example, Leean (1981) focused on self-directed learning in rural adults in Vermont with less than twelve years of formal education. This study found that personal learning occurs in different and creative ways such as when one is alone and in the situations of everyday life.

Some of the data about older adults in rural areas is not necessarily negative. In fact, during the last decade (1990-2000) for the first time, there was a general shift in population from urban back to rural areas [www.nal.usda.gov/ric/faqs/ruralfaq.htm]. Some research shows that rural areas may allow for a stronger and more extensive informal personal support network that may compensate for many of the problems in urban areas [www.house.gov/emerson/crc/overview/faq.html].

However, most rural (non-metropolitan) areas are not characterized by such positive descriptions. Rural areas typically have less economic opportunity, less social services available, and a higher proportionate number of older adults. In addition, rural areas are dominated by low wage industry and rural incomes are lower than urban. Health care and education is a greater challenge in rural areas because of less financial support and distance. Concerning seniors, managed care and obtaining prescription drugs can be significant problem. One of the contributors for this is the lack of public transportation in rural areas; nearly 80% of rural counties have no public bus service [www.house.gov/emerson/crc/overview/faq.html]. Because many younger adults leave these areas for various reasons, there is less financial support base for these aging citizens (Krout & Coward, 1998).

From the beginning of history, people have gathered together to discuss, to plan, and to learn for a variety of reasons (Candy, 1991; Dewey, 1995; Field, 2000; Foley, 2001; Hansen, 2000). This natural process of learning was an active part of the Greek society called "scholē" meaning leisure and school. This ideal learning, guided by Aristotle, was a personal and civil self-improvement program focusing on individual excellence and virtue. Education was referred to as a personal and deliberate molding of one's character that continues throughout one's life. The end result of this personal and civil education was a more cohesive society and supportive community. These early roots of self-directed learning attest to the power and influence of

personal education over the lifetime (Goodale & Godbey, 1988).

Self-directed learning has the potential to promote change. Some learners have helped to change their community to a more democratic and just society as a result of its emphasis on learning throughout the lifespan (Connelly, 1998). Also, SDL is the natural way for adults to learn (Knowles, 1984), and this personal learning is evident in a variety of cultures (Lamdin, 1997). SDL is more than an activity of discovery or homework; it is actually a part of the human experience, and a normal part of each adult's life (Confessore, 1992).

In summary there is a need for more information about the quality of life of older adults in rural areas. There seems to be a lack of information on the positive aspect of life in rural areas as well as its role in personal learning. Self-directed learning has the potential to be a powerful influence for change in the lives of older rural adults.

Methodology

This sample was comprised of older adults who live in rural areas. I limited this sample to participants who lived in the same non-metropolitan county in south Georgia. In the U.S. Census of 2000, this county had a population of 16,235. There are no metropolitan areas in this county; there are 35.9 people per square mile. In addition, this county and all of its surrounding counties were also listed as rural [www.census.gov].

In the 2000 Census data, Georgia had a total population of 8,188,453. In the USA 12.4% of the population are over 65, in the state of Georgia 9.6% of the population are over 65; in this county 12.5 % of the population are over 65. As mentioned earlier, there are a greater proportionate number of elderly in rural areas. In the year 2000, the USA had 75.1% white population, the state of Georgia 65.1%, and this county 85.5%.

There was an overt attempt to have a diverse sample, with Black and White represented as well as both genders. The sample contained 10 participants, five male, five female. Three were Black and seven were White. In addition this sample included a mixture of widowed and non-widowed participants. See Table 1.

The purpose of the study was to understand how older adults utilize self-directed learning during late life adjustment. The individuals in the sample were from 75 to 87 years old, reflected the rural demographic of the state of Georgia, and showed evidence of self-directed learning. This qualitative research primarily focused on interviews, but included documents as well as observation. For example, during the interviews if they referred to a particular episode of learning then I asked them to show me more about it. The interviews were spread over two sessions and reflected a semi-structured format with open-ended and flexible questions. More than one interview allows for

detailed information from the participants and the specific discussion of the research questions (Seidman, 1998).

Four criteria were used in selecting the participants in this study. These included the following: age, rural dwelling, diversity (race/gender), and evidence of self-directed learning. The minimum age of the sample was set

at 70, and the actual age range of the sample was 75 – 87. That participants were engaged in self-directed learning activities was ascertained in a phone call prior to the first interview. Table 1 indicates the demographics and the SDL projects of the participants.

Table 1.

Biographical Information

Name	Gender	Marital	Age	Education	Work (Current/Former)	C-GC-GGC*	Race
Robert	Male	42 years	75	Two year college degree	Retired/Bookkeeper	2(3)-4-0	Caucasian
Norman	Male	Widowed	83	Two year college degree	Retired/Jeweler	0(1)-1-2	Caucasian
Betty	Female	54 years	76	College Degree plus Certification	Retired/Librarian	3-6-0	Caucasian
Sue	Female	Widowed	87	One year college	Retired/Secretary	3-7-11	Caucasian
Bill	Male	Widowed	82	5 th grade	Retired/Handyman for Georgia Power, Started his own business	1(2)-3-0	African-American
Hattie	Female	Widowed	76	High School Degree	Retired/State Mental Health Worker	6-19-15	African-American
Dora	Female	Widowed	79	Two year college degree	Nursing Home Assistant/ Housewife, assist husband in business.	3-8-2	Caucasian
Wilbur	Male	48 years	75	Sixth grade, GED Certification	Handyman	3(5)-3	African – American
Charlie	Male	56 years	84	College Degree	Retired/Postal worker.	4(5)-10-1	Caucasian
Thelma	Female	Widowed	75	Two year college degree	Housewife	5-11-0	Caucasian

Note. *This indicates children – C, grandchildren – GC, and great-grandchildren – GGC. The parenthesis indicates original number. For example 3(4)-5-10(11) indicates the participant had four children originally, three are living, there are five grandchildren, originally there were 11 great-grandchildren and 10 are living.

Each participant was referred to us from a source that knew about the community including a co-operative extension agent, librarian, church staff, probate judge, and a member of the Board of Education. These key informants were asked if they knew active older adults who continue to learn. I was eventually provided with 25 names of potential candidates for this study and selected the first 10 participants who wanted to be in the study, had the time, and met the listed criteria. Each participant was interviewed over a two-

day period in two-hour segments. The data collection process was guided by the simultaneous analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). For example, after two interviews the data were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis. This analysis informed the subsequent interviews and helped to prepare us for the remainder of this research. The research questions that guided this study were the following: Describe what it is

like for you to live here. What is a typical day for you? Can you describe any activities that have been personally meaningful?

Findings

The participants discussed a variety of ways that living in this rural area has characterized their life, and by extension, how it has influenced their learning. Although most of the comments were positive there were also some negative issues. The positive comments focused around conducive elements of rural life, especially that of quiet and simple atmosphere, nature, and the people. The negative comments reflected hindrances to learning such as a lack of resources and the experiences of being a minority.

Conducive Aspects of Rural Life

These participants expressed an extremely positive outlook about living in this area. They referred to this town as a “small town.” They never used the word “rural” rather they said “country” if they lived outside of the town. All of the participants except for Sue have lived in this county for most of their lives. Three participants live in the country and seven live in or near the small town. Five of the participants were raised on a farm, usually without electricity and running water. The overall common attitude was that each person likes living here; three used the word “love” to describe life in this rural area. Thelma summarizes in one statement what many of the participants feel:

Cause you know it was fortunate to live in a small community, because you have access to everything. If I lived in a city, probably I would have never done all of this. Well, one, this you wouldn't have had the space. And two, you wouldn't have the close community here, like we have here.

This feeling of being fortunate, the access to all people, the space, and the close community are ideas that were repeated throughout the interviews. These are also concepts that can create a positive atmosphere for self-directed learning.

Charlie was also excited about living in this small town. He has lived here all of his life. When we were speaking about life in this town, he was completely positive describing the nature, the inhabitants, and raising children. His statement also concurs with many of the thoughts of these participants:

I think it is the greatest place to raise children and the greatest place to live...You can still go to concerts and things like that if you want to. They have the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra coming to Tifton you see. And I try to always go to that. And the Valdosta Arts, we used to

have it here. You can do that if you want, you know...But the air and water, our water comes out of the, that is one of our biggest assets in south Georgia, is that Floridian Aquifer, down there and that water comes out...Yeah, and it is pure water. Of course, it goes, down there in the water works, they put fluoride in it, I know that, and I believe they put a little bit of chlorine in it too. But, it's clean, good, good water to me. And the air we breathe it's fresh. Don't have any lines. Like this morning I went up and got a haircut and I was back home in 30 minutes from the time I left here...Went to the barbershop and just went in and sat down and the girl started cutting my hair. I come out and I wasn't gone but 30 minutes I don't think. And you can't do that in an urban area. And I don't like to be closed in.

As mentioned above, Charlie enjoys the simplicity of getting a haircut and getting back home in 30 minutes. Many of the participants discussed the quiet and simple atmosphere of living in a rural area.

Quiet and simple atmosphere. Many participants responded they are glad to live here because it is a quiet place and it is simple. Small towns are known to be quiet, perhaps driving teenagers crazy; it is also the melody of life for others. The quiet allows someone to become familiar with other sounds. Some discussed how you could hear the motor of a friend's car driving by. However, for many this quiet is also the right atmosphere for learning.

Robert and his wife have lived on their plot of land all of his life. It is 12 miles from the county seat and trees and fields surround them. I asked them to describe what it is like to live here:

Oh, just relaxed, relaxed atmosphere. No pressures, and you hear the sounds of the birds singing and you have the peaceful scenery...When we go to Atlanta, when we get back out to about Jonesboro, she says, “Whew, I am glad I don't live up here!” [Laughter]. We like the quiet and the peace; away from the hustle and bustle and being under tension ever time you get out and ride a little ways. It's to me, though, it's home, it's all I have ever known for any period of time. We like to travel, but we like to come back to our little peaceful abode.

Many of the participants would contrast and compare living in this small town to living in a large town. Hattie discussed how much she enjoyed living in this small town:

Well, I walk. I walk somewhere everyday; just get out and walk. Like go down to

visit my childrens. Just like instead of driving to visit them.... I love it here. It's a small town. And you know everybody, everybody know you, and what I mean, I just like it. I just don't like a big town.... In a big town...you got to wonder which way you gonna go to get to that place and all that kind of stuff. *I know this place* [emphasis added].

The simplicity of a rural area is evident in seeing familiar objects – people, roads, and landmarks. Usually everything someone sees is recognizable; if not you can stop and ask somebody.

Nature. Living in a small town and rural area places the individual closer to nature. Farmland and extensive pine forests surround this rural county. Participants discussed the impact of living in this agrarian area. During the discussion with Betty, you could see bird feeders, bushes, and shrubs. During the conversation various birds and squirrels interrupted us. Sue never wants to live in a city or crowded area again. Her mobile home is completely surrounded by trees and bushes. She describes what it is like to live in the country:

Well, you can hear the birds singing in the morning. I don't hear my neighbor's radios...I just like being in the country all this nature around me. Woods back here getting so thick, I am going to put my goats back there. And they will clean it out gradually.

She continues the description of her area and describes the impact of being close to nature. She is emphatic that she learns by observing nature:

Well...all nature teaches you! The birds with their little babies and how they faithfully carry through until they are...By the time they are through raising a little nest...And I think there are some hummingbirds...Cause I have some of these ...hibiscus...I see the hummingbirds, they are coming up...Garlic blooms are good for bringing in the hummingbirds...But one of my neighbors used to have cats...And they would catch my birds.

She feels close to nature and even depends on nature. She often gets food from the back yard:

I generally have two eggs every morning for breakfast, because I have nice fresh eggs. I got my own here. And milk, I like milk. I will drink tea, but I got allergic to coffee.

Dora describes what it is like for her to live in this rural area. "Wide open spaces, clean air. And uh, get outside, and especially early in the morning. The birds are singing and the air is cool and pure. And it's, it's just, it's just a feeling

you can't have anywhere else [laughter]." Similarly, Thelma describes what it has been like to live in this area. She dwells on how she grew up. "Well, I just have always had I guess, I grew up on a farm. And that was just growing things, was just, part of me." Several of the participants were raised on farms in the 1930's without electricity and running water.

Dora, Robert, and Sue live on a farm. Dora, Charlie, and Sue are active gardeners. Norman, Betty, Charlie, Bill, Wilbur, and Hattie live in a neighborhood in the city limits. Yet, even their homes had large lots, views of trees, and fields. Robert, Sue, Betty, Bill, Charlie, Thelma, Dora, and Wilbur have all been gardeners in the past. Only two of the ten participants did not discuss either growing up on a farm or living on a farm during their life, Norman and Hattie.

Many of their activities of learning involved nature, especially gardening and working in the yard. Being around nature, being so close to the outdoors, seeing trees and sky helps to set a positive atmosphere for learning.

People - a sense of community. The participants discussed how their neighbors, acquaintances, and friends in this rural area were a source for learning. These people also form an integral part of this rural life. More than just a resource for knowledge, people are part of this dynamic community. Although not as crowded as urban areas, people in rural areas may be closer in other ways. This closeness, this sense of familiarity with others, helps to create as Charlie says, "A great place to live." The participants brought up several topics. They feel closeness and a sense of community and they know they can learn from one another.

One of the main issues concerning community is the notion that help is always available from others. Robert's house seems to be in a desolate area, they are completely surrounded by pine trees and cultivated fields. I asked Robert and his wife to describe what it was like to live in this area and what would they miss if they moved into town: "We would miss all the people in the neighborhood. You are like one big family; here in this community...We all go to the same church right here in this community." Robert continues this thought: "You have a closer relationship, even though you live further apart. People in the country tend to more or less, bind together."

Norman feels comfortable in his neighborhood and knows that he can get help if he needs something:

Mostly the people are friendly, and uh, I live in a very nice neighborhood. And I have some neighbors that are really neighbors. And uh ...Well, they kind of keep up with how I am a doing. And if there is something wrong they would be willing to help me out. And in fact they have, one time or another...And things like driving me when I had to have some medication. Bring me food, fresh produce, and things like that.

Norman also spoke about the impact of a friend while learning the computer. Any time he needed some help, his friend would come over to his house to help solve a problem on Norman's computer.

Dora continues to describe her close feelings to the people in this community. These people include family, church, and activities with others. She describes the depth of relationships one can have within some of these organizations, such as the "ladies in the church" or one's family:

Well, it's having your family around you, and, and like I am saying we eat lunch every Sunday together. And see them, in between, or talk on the phone. But, sometimes I see them; I go by and get [my grandson] on Wednesday nights. And we go to church, and uh, that is just fun to me...They are people that have uh, the same beliefs, and way of life that you have. And you feel comfortable being around them. And uh, if you were in trouble, I think they would come to your aid. I would go to theirs...

Social clubs provide another platform for even deeper relations. Thelma is currently in three bridge clubs and one of these has lasted for 40 years:

Our bridge club is very close. And you know, when they have a death or something, we always fix the meal, that night. And then...when some of them children got married, of course now it is grandchildren, but anyway we would all have a party and go together. And just, you know, it has been a real influence to me to know...And then you can go there, and it [bridge] is some type of recreation that you can do.

Another interesting dynamic of the rural community is that "everyone knows you." Each participant discussed how nice it was that people recognized you and that people knew you. This familiarity promotes a comfortable atmosphere. Hattie states:

"I love it here. It's a small town and you know everybody, everybody know you. And what I mean, I just like it.... I know this place."

Wilbur discusses how a trip to the local gas station turned into a prayer meeting at the cash register:

Yeah, I attend church every Sunday, and then what I do, I will help a lot of people. That seem like to me that they cannot help their self. And I do have some that have a lot of trust in me. Uh, and [directed toward wife] can I tell this? I walked in a place about two or three months ago, and I bought gas. And when I bought this gas, this lady, she said, she was way down. And she said, "Wilbur, I am going to ask you something, will you pray for me?" I

stopped right then, and it was, five or six of us in there. And we held hands and we prayed for her. And later on in that afternoon, when I went home, she called, and asked me to pray for her again.

Robert and his wife have lived in the rural part of this county all of their life. He was born on the farm where he lives today. It is approximately 12 miles from the county seat. Like many who have lived in the country, they have witnessed a continual change in the notion of what is rural. Robert discussed how in the past rural was seen as negative; it was far away from resources and often associated with poverty. But he says today, most of the people left in rural areas are farmers and landowners who are college graduates. People come to work the fields from other countries and only temporarily. With all of the modern conveniences such as cable, good roads, better cars, improved communication, he feels the negative concept of rural is really a diminished factor. He feels that rural has become the quiet and beautiful place to live.

Hindrances of Rural Life

Although most of the comments from the participants were clearly positive, there were some negative comments about living in a rural and small town community. Most of these comments centered on lack of opportunities. For the African-Americans in the study they discussed negative aspects of being a minority, yet mainly when they were younger. Interestingly, almost all of these negative situations were counteracted with a determination to learn.

The three participants who are African-American tell a different story about life in this rural community. In many small towns the railroad tracks often divide White and Black citizens. All three participants lived "across the tracks." This is where most African-Americans in this town live; even Bill called it the "quarters." All three discussed positive and negative aspects of living as a minority. In this particular town the racial mix is 89-90% White and 10-11% Black. However, all three of these participants own their own home. They have many White and Black friends as well as large families. All three are well respected in the community. They discuss the difficulty of the past and how some negative memories linger. They also talked about opportunities a larger town would have provided and that their part of town is often overlooked. Yet they were very clear to emphasize there have been improvements in this area and that they enjoy living here.

Hattie feels many in her community do not get their fair share of the tax base. She feels they are promised a lot, but it rarely happens:

But now, like, what I am stressing on, it is a lot of times the mayors have tried to do things. But, they haven't been pushing, and they stopped. But we had somebody in there to be firm with it, and to tell us

that we gonna do such a such a thing on [my street]...And it don't never come through...And they said they asked the mayor about putting, you know, paved streets up there for them. And he promised, but he ain't got there yet [laughter]. But that is the kind of thing; when you ask for things, you know, give them a good reason why they can't do it you know. Don't tell them we will do it and then don't never get there.

This negative situation also became the incentive for Hattie to learn on her own how to make a difference in her part of town.

Bill talked a lot about repression in the past and that his people had a difficult time getting ahead in this county:

Well, I wanted to send my children to school. Back then you couldn't borrow no money to send children to school. We had to go to Ft. Valley or Savannah State. We couldn't go to school like in Valdosta, Val Tech, ABAC, Albany. It wasn't nothing like that. We had to go to Savannah or Ft. Valley, Ft. Valley was closest...Back in them times we didn't even have a high school in [this] county. Ya'll had one but we didn't have one. Ya'll had a bus to take ya'lls children to school but we didn't have any buses.

Later in the conversation I asked Bill how he survived. I wanted to know what he learned to become a successful man in this community:

Well, you knew the rules and the regulations. So you had to abide by the rules and regulations. You could try to buck the system if you want to, but it didn't work...But that was the system [high voice]! So, nothing to do about it, but join the system.

Similar to Hattie, Bill realized what he had to do to become a success and survive in this area.

Another negative aspect of living in a rural area is the lack of resources or opportunities. These missed opportunities of life in a rural area were discussed by two of the participants. Wilbur's wife states:

So having lived here all of my life it has been its been fairly good, you know, considering. I know and realize the fact that uh, if I had been, been born in a town where I would have, that I would have been fortunate enough to have gone to a college...To me, I could have maybe bettered myself in that way. But even, being born there and ...coming to a small town like this it has been fairly good, I would say.

Betty enjoys studying and researching complex topics. In her search for knowledge she has continually used the Internet. Here she discusses the lack of access to services that larger areas may have:

So, uh, we need help! Smaller towns desperately need technicians who will come to their homes for a reasonable fee and help them with a minor problem. We don't have that in [this town], we have [a person] who will come and won't let you pay him.

But more than this, Betty states that she cannot really discuss the topics that she is personally learning. She says that she feels alone in this pursuit of knowledge. Or, if she did really express her mind, there may be social reprisals:

It would be hard to do in isolation. It would be so much better if there could be discussions of these matters. I would dearly love to have somebody, "Well, what do you think about this, and what do you think about that?" But I can't do it because of our culture here in [this town]. If I were to spring some of these ideas that I have come to believe are so definitely bedrock truth, on a lot of people, they would think I had gone out of my mind [high voice]! [That] I was a heretic or I was delusional. You can't do it. Because, uh, most of course I don't know there might be a lot of people who think along these same lines here in [this town], but I haven't found them.

Betty summarizes the way she feels: "I don't know, I don't get into any groups. *You said you wanted to talk about rural life, well, that is the consequence of rural life. You become isolated, and I am one of them*" [emphasis added]. However, this did not stop Betty. This negative issue became an impetus for studying and learning on her own.

Like a careful teacher setting the right atmosphere for a class, the rural context is also the right atmosphere for personal living. Living in an area that is quiet, simple, close to nature, with people who are willing to help provides a positive environment for learning. However, resources may not be available to all and some people may feel alone in this rural area.

Discussion

Life in rural areas is changing throughout the world especially in western societies. Previously remote and even dangerous places to live now have Internet access, global positioning, overnight deliveries, and the accessibility of mobile telephones. Despite the convenience of these inventions, people continue to abandon rural life for steady work in cities (Quadagno, 1999). However, these urban centers are different in a variety of ways from the richness

of rural life. Western countries have witnessed the rise of an industrial society that has taken precedence over an agrarian life. The enjoyable atmosphere of rural life was often exchanged for a dependable salary. The rural dynamic is in constant shift, and today's information society makes it easier to live in rural areas (Hill & Moore, 2000).

In contrast to the findings in my research, there is a significant amount of literature that portrays a bleak existence in rural areas. Researchers have discussed difficult situations in these locations that include poverty, fewer cultural attractions, poor housing standards, isolation, reduced resources, and illiteracy (Hill & Moore, 2000; Quadagno, 1999; Tilburg & Moore, 1989). For example, Galbraith (1992) discussed a variety of topics of life in rural areas without reference to the positive dimensions of rural life. Some residents are frustrated with or leave rural areas because it is too restrictive and isolated (Tilburg & Moore, 1989). As discussed earlier, this sample consisted of active, older adults who continue to learn. It should be noted that because they have lived in this area all of their lives, they have most likely learned ways to enjoy their lives in this rural context, and compensate for lack of services and resources. Personal learning may have contributed to the lessening of the negative aspects of life in a rural area.

McCormick and McGuire (1996) indicated older adults in rural areas have more difficulty because of the erosion of the social structures in their communities. In addition, older adults with disabilities, without family, or from other cultural backgrounds may have less resources (Krout & Coward, 1998). Two of my participants mentioned the lack of resources in this area, but overall, they emphasized they were pleased with life in this rural county.

Life in a rural area is different in many ways than life in an urban area (Galbraith, 1992; Quadagno, 1999); those who live in a rural area share a unique culture (Tilburg & Moore, 1989). There is usually open country and farming in rural areas. Rather than being closed in or crowded with people, buildings or traffic, there is a sense of openness. Many of the participants discussed how in contrast to Atlanta, they preferred living in this area. There is also a notion of simplicity in rural areas. Thelma stated, "Why, if I need something, I can get in my car, run to the store, and be back in five or ten minutes." Waiting in line, traffic, or road construction are rare events. If someone has to wait, it is often because they have seen a friend and there is an expectation to "visit." Since many of the participants recognize or know others that live in this area, they are comfortable with each other. Unlocked doors, waving at passing cars, unannounced visits, and friendliness may be the expectation in rural areas.

Leann's (1981) research indicated some negative aspects of rural life, yet she also discussed the positive quality of living in a rural area. She pointed out how learning takes place in a variety of unique ways in rural situations that may elude urban or non-rural areas. These include thoughts and impressions while doing chores or walking in the outdoors.

This is similar to ideas of Tilburg and Moore (1989) that living in a rural area may force individuals to be more self-reliant and independent. Other researchers (Hill & Moore, 2000) list positive aspects of life in rural areas as a slower pace of life, wealth of natural resources, friendliness, lower crime rates, and diverse activities. My participants affirmed all of these, but primarily talked about the people in the community and the outdoors.

The communal aspect of rural life involves the friendliness and helpful attitude from neighbors, family, and friends. As discussed earlier, part of the nature of personal learning of these participants is that it is collaborative. The link to learning is that the collaborators are more accessible in rural towns than urban neighborhoods. If Sue needs to know something, without hesitation she will call or visit a neighbor. Norman knows he can count on his neighbors to take him to the doctor. As a widower, he can relax, and enjoy various activities without needless worry. Rogers (1969) and Rogers and Freiber (1994) wrote about the influence of the relationship between the teacher and the student. He encourages a close relationship, one that borders on friendliness and openness. The close atmosphere of rural areas promotes these interactions between learners and those with answers. Norman discussed how an instructor in a computer class would often drop by his house to help out with learning the computer. This man, 40-50 years younger, attends the same church, and they have a relationship that includes learning and friendship.

Knowles (1984) discussed the importance of considering the physical and the psychological environment: "In my estimation, a climate that is conducive to learning is a prerequisite to effective learning; and it seems tragic to me that so little attention is paid to climate in traditional education" (p. 14). The link to education is that this idyllic setting also helps to create a positive atmosphere for self-directed learning (Borish, 1991; Cajete, 1994; Cornell, 1989; Neill, 2003).

Each participant discussed that living in this area is simple, peaceful, and quiet. This "simple" area enables older adults to easily obtain resources needed for personal learning. The lack of traffic congestions and knowledge of the town contributes to the participant's willingness to be involved in activities. Safety did not seem to be a concern even among the participants who lived alone and in remote areas. Quietness in the area also allows the learner to be free from distraction, and may allow the person to focus and concentrate. This county is abundant in pine forests, ponds, lakes, swamps, and farms and many of the residents in this county are active gardeners.

From transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau, to modern day activists like Muir and Leopold (1970), writers have long discussed the positive impact of the outdoors on one's life (Fleck, 1990; Gollancz, 1901; Haines, 1977). Research has also substantiated the constructive sway of nature on the general well being of one's life (Segall, 2003). Thoreau in 1854 from his essay *Walking*

(Atkinson, 1950) writes about a sunset as if he is walking along a sandy dirt road in south Georgia:

The sun sets on some retired meadow, where no house is visible, with all the glory and splendor that it lavishes on cities, and perchance as it has never sat before....We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening. (p. 632)

In summary, there are several links with rural areas and learning. First, the scarcity of experts may motivate those who live in rural areas to become more resourceful and create unique ways of adapting (Penrod, Gueldner, & Poon, 2000; Tilburg & Moore, 1990). Second, the peace, quiet, and closeness to nature help to create a positive atmosphere for personal learning. Knowles (1984), Rogers (1969,1994), and Foley (2001) emphasized the context and atmosphere of learning as essential aspects for one's education. And third, the closeness that people feel toward one another creates a community of trust, openness, and willingness to talk with one another about activities of personal learning (Wenger, 1998). This research has helped to bridge some of the gaps in knowledge concerning aspect of rural life for older adults. Of significance for this study is that there are more older adults in rural areas. An analysis of the data has shown that life in rural areas for older adults is primarily a positive experience resulting in an ideal situation for personal learning. This positive atmosphere for personal learning was seen as peace and quiet in the surroundings, simplicity in the organization of one's life and area, and closeness to nature.

Implications

The main implication of practice from this research is for older adults as well as facilitators of older adult learning. Of special concern are gerontologists, those who work with or promote programs with the elderly. We can assume that SDL is occurring in the lives of older adults, because this is the natural way for adults to learn (Knowles, 1984); therefore, SDL should be encouraged as a part of any program. SDL is positively related to life satisfaction (Brockett, 1985a), it empowers the learner (Lamdin, 1997), yet allows for the differences of each older person (Knowles, 1984). Schon (1987) suggested that facilitators should reflect on their own experience and practice to consider how to incorporate these ideas. Also, those who work with older adults should incorporate the participants in the planning process of their activities or classes (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Forester, 1989). When the older adult

encounters unforeseen difficulties or involuntary disengagement (Kleiber, 1999), this presents a natural opportunity for the older adult as well as facilitators to learn during these teachable moments (Havighurst, 1972).

Local school systems in every segment of our society can integrate older adults. It is time to reopen the doors of the public school system to all ages by incorporating the perspective that education occurs throughout the lifetime (Chapman & Aspin, 1997). Programs such as Learning in Retirement and Elderhostel are effective, but leave out many older adults who don't want to travel. Every public school system could set up a similar program offering the expertise from lifelong learners. Lamdin discusses how older adults continue to learn throughout their life:

And they are learning about computers, in classes at schools, computer stores, senior centers, bookstores, and retirement centers; on their own by trial and error, with books and manuals, with programmed learning texts, and with help from friends, neighbors, and grandchildren. (pp. 133-134)

Other suggestions are to take advantage of local schools for the continued education of older adults. The school could be utilized to offer classes of interest especially that of travel, computers, and hobbies and crafts. The school also has facilities to incorporate important concerns of exercise and nutrition. Many older adults have confidence and expertise in a variety of areas and may be interested in teaching. Also, this third age school could provide an additional source of revenue for rural schools.

An important implication of this study involves the use of the computer. An increasing number of older adults enjoy using the resources of the computer and Internet for self-directed learning activities. Older adults are not only learning about the computer, they are also learning with the computer (Lamdin, 1997). For example, utilizing Internet resources for health such as SeniorNet.org or Webmd could be a valuable resource. In my study, five of the participants have taken classes on the computer, and three of them have computers at home. Timmerman (1998) suggested patience for these older learners, especially with the fine motor skills required in the use of computers. Learning more about the use of computers as well as internet may help to offset some of the distances experienced in rural areas.

Nursing homes, or assisted health care centers are especially significant for older adults. These places are often seen as the final place of life. Rather than holding the hands of frail older adults, facilitators could promote a revolutionary perspective. Jarvis (2001) admonished nursing homes not only to meet the needs of dying citizens, but to also encourage learning: "Create an atmosphere and an environment in which it is not only possible to continue learning, but that older people regard it as something that is not exceptional, but rather that they are expected to be interested in things" (p. 142). Nursing homes or assisted

facilities can become places of learning about aging for families (Ralston, 1978). Although they will not have the strength or energy as young or middle old, learning continues in the healthy older adult. Nursing homes could begin to hire adult educators as part of the staff. Rather than dingy walls and a terminal outlook, you can reshape nursing homes by providing the occupants with exercise, brightly colored rooms, art, and libraries.

All of the participants in this study discussed the importance of their faith. Older adults are looking for places to worship and learn in this personal dimension of their life. Synagogues, churches, and mosques can encourage older adults by addressing the needs of late life adjustments rather than focusing on youth oriented ministries. Other important considerations include the influence of local newspapers as well as local libraries on older adults in rural areas. All of the participants in this study were avid readers of the local newspapers and studied several newspapers daily. Local libraries are also important places for older adults. Local newspapers and the library staff should consider how they can encourage the older adults by providing areas of personal learning on topics of concern for older adults, especially the various changes in their life.

Summary

The older adults in this study discussed the positive aspects of living in a rural area. This was apparent by their commentary on the simple and peaceful atmosphere, the closeness to nature, and a community of fellow learners. Some of the participants stated there are negative aspects of living in a rural area. These comments revolved around the difficulty of the lack of resources and of being a minority.

These ten participants portray a different view of life in rural south Georgia. Defying stereotypes of older adults, these participants portray positive images of active, self-directed learners even in late life. The various adjustments that occur in the life of the older adult become the impetus to personally learn an assortment of significant topics. The rural setting was found to be a predominantly positive environment for personal learning.

Older adults have an extra amount of time usually because of retirement. This new time, allows for the pursuit of self-directed learning. Many times the desire to learn is initiated by the changes in the older adult's life – especially changes in health and in one's family. The process of learning is enjoyable; structured in various forms, has a goal, and involves other people. During the process an event may occur that spurs the older adult to continue with this learning; this catalyst is usually another person or some event. One of the reasons this learning is so enjoyable is because of the richness of life in rural areas. There seems to be time for learning in this quiet and simple area, and if the older adult needs to ask a question there is a community available to help. Because of the social change in being an older adult, they may feel limited or frustrated in this search

for knowledge. If the activity is enjoyable, they may decide to continue.

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