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Further Reading: Herbert, A. (2020). What Role Does Rural Place Play in the Lives of Mid-Life Women in Sweden and Ireland? *Societies* <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/10/4/84>

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What role does rural place play in the lives of mid-life women in Sweden and Ireland?

Place identity and self-identity create multiple pathways to place attachment and perspectives on the ageing and well-being of older rural women. Two independent studies of 25 rural mid-life women (45-65 years) in Connemara, Ireland (doctoral research, 2017) and ten in Värmland, Sweden (post-doctoral research, 2019) employed a lifecourse framework and constructivist grounded theory to produce qualitative data that underpin the heterogeneity of gendered rural lives.

Research Findings

These studies draw on the social representation model in which rurality becomes the meanings attached to it: rural becomes defined through the senses and aesthetics, such as slower pace of life, greater sense of space, and an increased sense of intimacy. The Sweden study shows a marked appreciation of the environment and its biotic and abiotic qualities, which helped to bond rural women to place. Most participants of both studies self-identified as 'rural women', whether native to their area or in-migrant, but discourse was nuanced. Those of the Sweden study held stronger affiliations to their rural environment, which enhanced their levels of personal rural identity and attachment to place. Each unique, both Värmland and Connemara are renowned areas of scenic beauty, but levels of place identity, attachment, and in particular utility varied.

Participants from the Sweden study more purposely incorporated their natural environments, both green (forest) and blue (lakes) into their everyday lives in order to enhance feelings of well-being. From foraging and even hunting to sailing and swimming, findings validated the natural environment for restorative purposes. In contrast, participants from the Ireland study praised Connemara's qualities such as healthy clean air, but mostly fell short of utilising their environments actively. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this, including a perception of busier working lives and less discretionary time among the Ireland participants, but also perhaps from socio-cultural norms, including Sweden's 'outdoor' ethos in comparison to that of Ireland. Crucially, Sweden's participants anticipated relatively high well-being in older age in comparison to Ireland's, attributable in the main to State supports for housing and health.

Policy Implications

The mid-life rural women of these two studies reported similar and diverse perspectives on where and how they lived, highlighting the necessity for bespoke rural policies. Policy-makers should consider what constitutes the components of a positive rural place identity if they wish to encourage rural re-population. These components might include for example the restorative features of environment and a sense of 'belonging' that may come from community intimacy. However; policy must also address the rural issues that may negate strong place identity and attachment, including perceptions of social isolation from critical networks, geographic loneliness, and social exclusion from mainstream socio-economic services.