

Sharing the Narratives of Farmers' Occupational Experiences in Context

Roisin Neville, Rosemary Joan Gowran

University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

Social isolation among older adults has been highlighted as a prominent issue in recent years at a global level. An Irish study (2005) revealed that some 50,000 older adults are socially isolated [2]. Furthermore, farming communities are disposed to social isolation due to cultural characteristics of stoicism and independence [1]. The farming context presents special challenges for people's health and well-being.

This paper will present the findings of a graduate-entry Masters study which highlights the importance of understanding context through exploration of the occupational experiences among older farmers living alone.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants in rural Ireland. The data gathered was analysed using the qualitative method of narrative analysis.

The shared narrative revealed that this particular group of older adults have experienced changing patterns of occupation throughout the lifespan; however despite challenging transitions such as loss of spouse and worker role, they adapted to change and continued participation in meaningful occupations. These findings highlight the complexities of ageing in a farming context and; essentiality of understanding the contextual experiences of this population, as no negative links to social isolation emerged.

Although these findings are based on a small sample, they will create opportunities for discussion as to the importance of an in-depth understanding of context and its impact on occupational performance. If the development of occupational science and occupational therapy practice is to be successful in various cultures, understanding and respecting the contextual uniqueness of varying individuals, occupations and environments, must underpin them. Adopting a more reflexive approach to context appears significant if the profession claims to be truly client-centred. The outcomes of this study recommend further research to review how occupational therapy students gain an understanding of context, and for the profession to create opportunities for in-depth ethnographic studies to understand impact of context for practice.

[1] Treacy, P. et al. (2005) 'Loneliness and Social Isolation Among Older Irish People', National Council on Ageing and Older People, 84, 1-233.

[2] Heenan, D. (2006) 'The Factors Influencing Access To Health And Social Care In The Farming Communities Of County Down, Northern Ireland', Ageing & Society, 26, 373-391.