Interrogating the Contested Spaces of Rural Aging: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Mark W. Skinner, PhD*1 and Rachel Winterton, PhD2

1Trent Center for Aging and Society, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada. 2John Richards Initiative, La Trobe University, Wodonga, Australia.

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Abstract
Informed by a critical turn underway in rural gerontology, this article explores how the intersection of global and local trends relating to population aging and rural change create contested spaces of rural aging. The aim is to build our understanding of rural as a dynamic context within which the processes, outcomes, and experiences of aging are created, confronted, and contested by older adults and their communities. A review of key developments within gerontology and rural studies reveals how competing policies, discourses, and practices relating to healthy aging and aging in place, rural citizenship and governmentality, and social inclusion and inequality combine in particular ways to empower or disempower a diverse range of older rural adults aging in a diverse range of rural communities. The article provides a contextually sensitive perspective on potential sources of conflict and exclusion for older adults in dynamic rural spaces and further enhances our understanding of how rural physical and social environments are constructed and experienced in older age. A framework for interrogating emergent questions about aging in rural contexts is developed and implications for advancing research, policy, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Rural and urban issues, Sociology of aging/social Gerontology, Conceptual development, Public policy, Environment (i.e., ergonomics)

In examining the global contexts in which people grow older, rural places are assuming greater significance for understanding the processes, outcomes, and representations of aging. Predominantly, this trend is associated with growing global rates of rural population aging, which are anticipated to increase demand on health and social care services in non-metropolitan regions (World Health Organization, 2015). However, there is also a consensus that rural environments present different challenges and opportunities to health and wellbeing in later life to those experienced in urban spaces (Glasgow & Berry, 2013; Joseph & Cloutier-Fisher, 2005; Phillipson & Scharf 2003). Despite these differences, the rural context remains largely underexamined within gerontological research (Scharf, Walsh, & O’Shea, 2016). In particular, there is a dearth of critical inquiry that can be partly attributed to common romanticizations of rural areas as “good places to grow old” due to perceived high levels of social capital and support (Keating, 2008). In recent decades, work across diverse international contexts has sought to debunk this simplistic notion, with key studies calling for more critical perspectives in researching rural aging (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012; Chalmers & Joseph, 2006; Wenger, 2001). The critical lens acknowledges the role of structural changes and constraints on older people’s status and access to resources, and enables exploration of how older adults become disempowered through macro-level social and economic trends (Bernard & Scharf, 2007; Minkler, 1996; Phillipson, 1998). It also enables exploration of how older people and their communities experience and transform processes and outcomes of socioeconomic, demographic, and environmental change.
With regard to spaces of rural aging, the critical turn has given rise to a body of literature within social and environmental gerontology that draws on human ecology theory. This perspective acknowledges that rural older adults are not only shaped by but also play a significant role in constructing their community environments (Keating & Phillips, 2008; Skinner, 2014; Winterton et al., 2016). However, there has been little exploration within gerontology of the processes and dynamics underpinning these constructions and experiences of place (Cutchin, 2009; Wahl & Lang, 2004). Implicit in discussions relating to older people's access to power and resources within rural settings are the negotiations, conflicts, and contests associated with use, production, and occupancy of rural social, built and symbolic spaces, which either facilitate or hinder access (Chalmers & Joseph, 2006). As Woods (2006) notes, these negotiations over rural space are generated through differing interpretations of the rights and responsibilities associated with being a rural citizen, which is commonly referred to as rural citizenship (Neal & Agyeman, 2006). We argue that understanding how the intersection of rural citizenship and population aging creates “contested rural spaces” is fundamental for understanding how diverse rural older adults become empowered or disempowered within certain contexts.

Contested spaces encompass “geographical locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources/access to power” (Low & Zuniga, 2003: 18). In many cases, this conflict relates to disputes over rights and access to different spaces, and the future trajectories of these spaces (Morgan & Kristensen, 2006; Schmelzkopf, 1995). Given that the literature has simultaneously highlighted issues relating to the contested nature of rural space (e.g., Woods, 2005) and of older age (e.g., Jones & Higgs, 2010; Scharlach et al., 2012), examining how these contested spaces intersect is critical in understanding how older adults can age well (Joseph & Skinner, 2012; Winterton & Warburton, 2014). Consequently, our aim in this article is to explore how contested spaces of rural aging are created, and the implications of this for older people and their communities, setting forth a contextually sensitive framework for rural aging research, policy, and practice. In doing so, we seek to contribute simultaneously to a spatial turn underway in social gerontology (Andrews, Evans, & Wiles, 2013) as well as a critical turn called for within rural gerontology (Scharf et al., 2016). The article begins with an overview of key developments within these fields that inform our approach, before discussing how contested spaces of rural aging are created, what is being contested and the processes and outcomes of contestation for diverse groups. We conclude with a consideration of the implications of contested rural aging spaces for advancing research, policy, and practice.

Critical Rural Gerontology

As Scharf and colleagues (2016) noted in their authoritative review of the emerging field of rural gerontology, academic interest in rural as a context of aging is long-standing. This is evident within pioneering studies of the lives of older rural people from the 1960s onward (e.g., Youmans, 1967), through to the burgeoning of gerontological interest in the trends, processes, and outcomes of rural demographic change around the world today (Scharf et al., 2016). Propelled by the development and application of ecological perspectives within environmental gerontology (Greenfield, 2012; Kendig, 2003; Rowles & Bernard, 2013; Scheidt & Schwartz, 2013) and, more recently, spatial perspectives within geographical gerontology (Andrews, Cutchin, McCracken, Phillips, & Wiles, 2007; Skinner, Andrews, & Cutchin, in press), rural has become a focal point for research on aging contexts. Indeed, recent publications in the field argue for greater attention to rural aging studies for their transferable insights into pressing program and policy issues facing contemporary aging societies (e.g., retirement migration, social isolation, and age-friendly communities; e.g., Brown & Glasgow, 2008; Keating, 2008; Skinner & Hanlon, 2016). Notwithstanding this intellectual trajectory nor the current global trend in rural population aging; however, rural gerontology is only now being recognized as a coherent field of inquiry.

Twenty years ago, in a review of the field that remains prescient today, Rowles (1988: 115) observed how “...decades of researching on ageing in rural environments has resulted in limited progress towards developing a distinctive rural gerontology”. Illustrative of broader critiques underway in the social sciences at the time, his review called for greater engagement with post-positivist theorizations of rural contexts of aging (i.e., ecological, sociocultural, and phenomenological) that help account for the diversity and complexity of rural aging processes, outcomes, and experiences. Two decades on, as evident in the program of the first International Conference on Rural Aging (Hermanova, Brown, Goins, & Briggs, 2001) and the international contributions to subsequent special issues and edited collections on rural aging themes (e.g., Glasgow & Berry, 2013; Hash et al., 2014; Hagan Hennessy et al., 2014; Keating, 2008; Milbourne, 2012; Skinner & Hanlon, 2016), social gerontologists had begun to address this gap by expanding the theoretical breadth of rural aging research to account for exclusion, identity, and representation, among other identifiers of change and difference. They also continued to strengthen the applied focus of gerontology on the issues facing aging rural populations; namely, population dynamics, service provision, technology, and health policy (Cutchin, 2009). As observed by Scharf et al. (2016), however, despite many gerontological studies continuing to view rural as merely a setting for empirical research rather than an ever-changing context that can potentially shape experiences and outcomes for older adults, an increasingly robust body of multidisciplinary rural aging scholarship—if not the foundations of a distinctive rural gerontology—has now emerged.
Of particular importance for building our understanding of the contested spaces of rural aging is the influence of two recent developments aimed at addressing the lack of engagement with contextually sensitive and critical perspectives within gerontology more broadly. First, is the spatial turn underway in social gerontology, led by greater engagement with geographical concepts of space and place in the study of older people’s interactions with their environments, communities, and societies (Andrews et al., 2013). Work within geographical gerontology is shedding light on how rural aging contexts (spaces, places, environments, landscapes) are produced through the interactions of older people and the settings within which they experience and respond to aging (Cutchin, 2009). The implication for rural gerontology is an increased recognition of the importance of context for understanding older adults’ experiences of the processes and outcomes of aging (Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2012). For instance, international studies have highlighted the interdependent relationship between older adults’ voluntarism and rural community sustainability, in that the volunteer contributions of older adults are critical in ensuring that vital community services and supports are available to support aging in place (Skinner & Joseph, 2007; Walsh & O’Shea, 2008; Winterton & Warburton, 2016). Second, is the overarching influence of culturally informed critical approaches to aging studies that advocate for increasing attention to the diversity and complexity of aging experiences, and how these are socially constructed (Katz, 2005). Work within critical gerontology is illuminating the ways in which gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability relate to processes and outcomes, experiences and representations of aging (Twigg & Martin, 2015). Implications for rural gerontology include the need to understand and challenge the construction (and contestation) of environments of rural aging, and the myths and stereotypes that are associated with prevailing conceptions of aging and rurality. Key studies highlight the increasing diversity of life histories, experiences, and expectations of older adults in rural areas (Keating & Phillips, 2008) and how this diversity creates the likelihood that older rural adults will challenge the implicit and explicit rights and responsibilities associated with being a rural citizen (Chalmers & Joseph, 2006; Farmer, Philip, King, Farrington, & MacLeod, 2010; Glasgow & Brown, 2012; Skinner, Joseph, Hanlon, Halseth, & Ryser, 2016a). Taken together, these developments point to the need for better understanding the contested spaces of rural aging as a means of further advancing a theoretically informed and applied “rural turn” in contemporary gerontology advocated for by Scharf et al. (2016).

Contested Spaces of Rural Aging

Consistent with critical human ecological approaches to rural gerontology (Keating & Phillips, 2008), the rural aging literature highlights the importance of interactions across and within different environmental contexts (e.g., household, community, organizational, and policy) in creating contested spaces of rural aging. In aging rural communities, we propose that these conflicts emerge over the negotiation of rural citizenship, which encompasses the “rights and entitlements to the symbolic, geographic and social spaces” that make up rural places (Neal & Agyeman, 2006). However, it also reflects the performance of citizen responsibilities to access these rights (Woods, 2006), through adherence to both formal and informal codes of conduct relating to the consumption or production of rural space (Parker, 2002; 2006). Our discussion in this section draws on the contemporary rural gerontology literature to articulate the processes and practices that give rise to contested space, and in doing so, identifies five key, interconnected processes and outcomes, which are articulated as follows.

1. Contested spaces of rural aging are created as a result of competing policies and practices relating to healthy aging and rural governmentality, and changing rural demographics

Observing the rights and responsibilities associated with rural citizenship are critical to community sustainability in the context of wider rural restructuring (Woods, 2006) and this is pressing where policies and trends relating to both aging and the rural intersect. In the context of global population aging and its purported economic impact, neoliberal governments are promoting positive aging discourses that emphasize individual responsibility for wellbeing and the right to pursue choice and independence as they age (Angus & Reeve, 2006). This is associated with the reinvention of later life as a time to exercise agency, choice, and consumption (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010), and to challenge traditional stereotypes of older age as a time of marginalization and decline (Twigg, 2007). However, this aging discourse will inevitably conflict with prominent implicit and explicit rural codes of conduct (Manthorpe et al., 2008). In the context of decades of rural service restructuring and economic decline, which have severely influenced the sustainability of rural settings, neoliberal governments have drawn on governmentality discourses to rationalize limited rural public expenditure. This approach emphasizes the importance of individual involvement in, and responsibility for, rural community governance in keeping rural communities sustainable. Specifically, it emphasizes the need for rural communities to develop proactive strategies for community development independent of government (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000), which is “sold” as a right. However, implicit in this discourse is the importance of benevolence and acting for the public good (Woods, 2006), which will not necessarily align with individualist approaches to aging nor the capacities of rural older adults to engage in community governance.

This contradiction also becomes problematic when considered that rural aging populations are becoming increasingly diverse in response to wider counter-urbanization...
trends and growing rates of rural retirement migration (Glasgow & Brown, 2012; Stockdale, 2011). In the context of wider aging policies aimed at developing the age-friendliness of community settings (World Health Organization, 2007), different life course experiences and relationships with the rural will inevitably result in contestation over what age-friendliness should encompass in a rural setting, and what this entails for rights and responsibilities to rural communities in older age. Within a public policy setting where governments are looking to exclude themselves from the direct provision of health and social care (Moffatt, Higgs, Rummery, & Jones, 2012), and the relative unattractiveness of the rural market for health and social care providers (Hanlon & Halseth, 2005), conflict will inevitably emerge over who is responsible for the care of older adults in rural settings. The differential rates of population aging in rural settings (Smailes, Griffin, & Argent, 2014) and the varied resource base within rural communities (Keating & Phillips, 2008) will also influence the importance with which population aging is viewed at the local level, which may prompt disputes over perceived rights and entitlements.

Consequently, although macro-level trends create the context for the emergence of rural contested spaces, the actual contestation of these spaces occurs within community and individual environments, and are facilitated by multiple actors. As our subsequent discussion highlights, conflict, and tension emerge within aging rural spaces in relation to two primary issues: rights and responsibilities to rural space in older age; and rights and responsibilities associated with rural aging in place.

2. Contested spaces of rural aging emerge over competing discourses over the rights to rural symbolic, political, and cultural space in older age

Rural community contexts are significant in shaping the health and wellbeing of older adults (e.g., Hagan Hennessy et al., 2014; Keating, 2008). However, alongside the many processes of change underway in diverse rural settings, continued population aging in rural areas will prompt increased contestation of the right to diverse rural spaces—symbolically, politically, and culturally. As Chalmers and Joseph (2006) note, aging has prompted increased competition for the right to imagine what rural communities should look like; that is, as symbolic spaces of aging. Different cohorts of older adults are actively contesting their right to the rural, by contesting socioeconomic regional and local flows to the countryside, rural development (Giarchi, 2006) and threats to environmental sustainability (Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013). Research has noted that the rural imaginary is debated and challenged among older people aging in place, older in-migrants, established rural power elites, and long-term residents in terms of what the rural should look like, how it should be regulated and how it should be used (Burholt et al., 2013; Glasgow, Min, & Brown, 2013; Winterton & Warburton, 2016).

Older people also are active in contesting political space within rural communities, in terms of power to govern and control, or to regulate symbolic space. In Chinese contexts, for example, commentators have noted that local authorities often try to mobilize seniors’ associations because of their political influence, which creates new relations of local power (Deng & O’Brien, 2014; Hansen, 2008). Similarly, Western research has noted that rural older adults are active in contesting government processes and planning at various levels (Brown & Glasgow, 2008; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013; Winterton & Warburton, 2016). Older people are often the custodians of long-term rural community groups, which have emerged as highly contested spaces within rural communities in the context of demographic change. Research has noted conflict between the younger-old and older-old in relation to succession planning for rural community groups (Winterton & Warburton, 2016) as well as resistance among older adults to groups run and managed by well-connected rural power elites (Warburton, Scharf, & Walsh, 2016). Farmer and colleagues (2010) have also observed tensions between local organizational management structures and community experts in relation to legitimacy of knowledge about rural aging, with older adults fighting to be heard within debates relating to rural health service delivery (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011).

Within a changing rural demography, the right to a rural place identity in older age also is highly contested. The differing life course trajectories of older people in relation to experience of historical time and place within the rural have created tension in relation to notions of belonging and power (Winterton & Warburton, 2013). In particular, increasing levels of rural retirement migration and the emergence of rural locations as spaces of tourism and consumption are producing contested rural space by disturbing established rural social and cultural traditions (Giarchi, 2006). Moreover, the assumption of power by older adults in rural places may challenge existing rural community belief systems, leading to contested cultural spaces of rural aging (Curry, Burholt, & Hagan Hennessy, 2014).

3. Contested spaces of rural aging emerge over competing discourses relating to the right to age in place within rural communities

The ability of communities to be age-friendly in the context of rural transformative processes is also highly contested (Walsh, O’Shea, Scharf, & Shucksmith, 2014). At the individual level, the literature has noted tension between the benefits of rural aging in place, such as increased independence, place attachment and community belonging, and the constraints it presents in accessing required services and geographic isolation (Chapman, 2009; Duggleby et al., 2011; Hernandez & Newcomer, 2007; Keating et al., 2011). Studies have also identified conflicting notions among older people in relation to how they should be supported as they age. Although rural older adults do not wish to be a burden, they may similarly expect that families and communities should look after them (King & Farmer,
First, many older people are contesting their right to age in place (Skinner, Joseph, & Herron, 2016b). As highlighted in the previous point, this contestation is largely played out within civic spaces. In opposition to government predictions relating to the burden that rural population aging will place on the service sector, many older adults are challenging this notion by refusing services (Scharf & Bartlam, 2008; Walker et al., 2013). However, they are similarly advocating for the right to access required services needed to enable aging in place in the context of rural restructuring, and opposing the notion that they should move to access required services (Rogers, Barr, O’Callaghan, Brumby, & Warburton, 2013). Across international contexts, older adults are challenging government cuts-backs, hospital closures and health service change in rural areas, the age-friendliness of settings and services (Keating et al., 2011; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013), and the advent of virtual spaces of care (Parkhurst et al., 2014). In doing so, they are resisting the provision of substandard health and aged care services, and in an era of personalization are exercising their rights to pursue support that will suit them (Manthorpe & Stevens, 2010), by contesting rural service gaps, unresponsive services, or fragmented care delivery (Giarchi, 2006; Walker et al., 2013). Within this arena, older people with diverse financial and functional capacities are competing with each other for scarce local resources (Giarchi, 2006), with different groups of older adults having different perspectives on how local governments and communities should allocate resources and amenities (Brown & Glasgow, 2008; Winterton & Warburton, 2016). In this context, tension arises between the individual and the state in relation to responsibility for aging in rural communities, in terms of the extent to which the state should extend support to older people who choose to remain in small, service-challenged rural communities (Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher, 2005). However, the extent to which aging rurally is a choice is also highly contested, with many older adults unable to relocate as they age (Warburton et al., 2016). Consequently, conflict is arising in relation to how older people interact with health and aged care services, and the way these services are planned and managed (Farmer et al., 2010).

Second, various local actors are challenging policy directives that impact on older adults’ rights to age within their rural communities. Community providers, such as not-for-profit and community groups, are taking action to enable viable aging in place (Skinner et al., 2016b), with rural community members actively resisting service changes for the sake of older residents (Farmer, Nimegeer, Farrington, & Rodger, 2012). In particular, the rural voluntary sector plays a role in challenging rural restructuring and the imperative that older adults should move to access services (Joseph & Skinner, 2012). In some cases, they are advocating for the rights of older people within the context of rural restructuring; with voluntary not-for-profit organizations resisting structural changes passed down by government, and opposing polices designed to introduce market-oriented competition in rural areas by means of legal challenges and advocacy. In doing so, they are evading the political preference for private not-for-profit by doing whatever is required (Joseph & Skinner, 2012). Rural media also plays a key role in initiating this contested space by calling for the defense of community interests in the face of government health system restructuring. They challenge community members to lobby government to protect local interests, give a voice to volunteers and oppose the responsibility of volunteer-based as opposed to formal health care systems (Skinner, Joseph, & Herron, 2013).

However, tension is also emerging between local organizations, due to power struggles over responsibility for service provision to rural older adults (Skinner et al., 2016a; Winterton, 2016). In the context of increased devolution of services to the voluntary sector, conflict has arisen between managed competition and voluntary sector capacity in relation to responsibility for long-term care (Cloutier-Fisher & Skinner, 2006). Recent research in Australia, for instance, has similarly identified conflicting views between health, government, and community organizations, in terms of their respective responsibility to cater for aging populations, to engage isolated older adults, and to resource age-friendly initiatives (Winterton, 2016). Within rural organizational spaces, the equitable distribution of resources to aging populations is also contested. Aging may not be a priority for certain organizations and research has noted organizational tensions relating to the ability to provide age-friendly initiatives in the context of structural constraints and competing priorities (Menec et al., 2015; Spina & Menec, 2013). At a government level, smaller communities are often competing with larger centres in relation to allocation of age-friendly resources and some communities may have age-friendly projects and initiatives competing with each other (Menec et al., 2015). Thus, equitable resourcing is problematic in relation to existing tensions relating to regional versus local service provision. Many rural organizations are grappling with the desire to provide flexible, responsible local models of care to older people in greater need, against government mandates to provide more general, utilitarian models of care (Farmer et al., 2010; Manthorpe et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2013).

4. Contested spaces of rural aging are created through active and passive interactions between diverse older adults, wider community members, rural organizations, and policy

As the examples in our discussion have already alluded to, aging rural spaces become contested through the active and passive actions of both older people and rural community actors. In terms of active opposition, rural older adults contest negative stereotypes relating to aging
through participation in daily activities, and their leisure and consumption activities (Burholt, Curry, Keating, & Eales, 2014). They also resist service changes through active involvement as volunteers (Skinner et al., 2016b; Winterton & Warburton, 2014). Older adults also mobilize at the grassroots level through advocacy and protest actions defending their rights (Giarchi, 2006; Keating et al., 2011; Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013; Winterton & Warburton, 2016). However, trends relating to older people’s participation can change power structures within rural communities and organizations, which can prompt conflict (Winterton & Warburton, 2016). Rural community not-for-profit organizations also resist structural changes initiated by government by undertaking advocacy and legal challenges against the development of market-oriented competition (Skinner & Joseph, 2007). However, they are often simultaneously contesting the right of older people to age in place against these structural changes by mobilizing to provide volunteer services (Skinner et al., 2016b). Continuing our earlier observation, albeit here at a macro-level, the media also play a significant role in highlighting the capacity for rural communities to resist structural change, through questioning the responsibility of volunteers against that of formal health systems (Joseph & Skinner, 2012; Skinner et al., 2013).

However, contested rural aging spaces also are initiated through passive processes, whereby community actors resist policy imperatives relating to governmentality and positive aging by refusing to engage. For example, rural older people often refuse to travel long distances to access health care (Wenger, 2001) and resist technological interventions that are designed to compensate for a lack of proximal services (Parkhurst et al., 2014). There is also evidence that rural older adults are increasingly reluctant to engage in community governance, voluntarism, and co-production of rural services (Munoz, Farmer, Warburton, & Hall, 2014; Winterton & Warburton, 2016). Conversely, many rural older adults refuse to step down from community leadership positions (Winterton, 2016), and although there is an increasing emphasis on local organizations and clubs for the social care of older adults, many older people refuse to join groups that are perceived to have been hijacked by local power elites (Warburton et al., 2016).

5. Contested spaces of rural aging can both create and reproduce inequity within rural communities for older adults

Outcomes of contested aging rural spaces manifest at both the individual and community levels. For older adults who can gain greater rights through these contested processes, this will likely result in a more agentic older age within a rural setting that fits their needs and preferences. However, this may not be advantageous for other older adults nor for the wider rural community, with contestation processes facilitated by or among older adults linked to community conflict over rights to the rural, deprivation, discrimination, and disconnectivity (Curry et al., 2014; Giarchi, 2006). For those older persons who lose power or resources through these contested processes, this may result in a lack of fit (symbolically, politically, or culturally) and in some cases a more precarious experience of aging in place (Keating, Eales, & Phillips, 2013). As highlighted above, active resistance is prominent among rural older adults in relation to access to rural space and aging in place. However, this is problematic where mobilization of rights is undertaken more actively by certain groups of rural older people, as these parties are more likely to have their voices heard in relation to resource allocation. However, this active mobilization can be beneficial where it places more pressure on rural community structures and governments to be more accommodating of their aging populations as a whole (Winterton & Warburton, 2016).

Similarly, although the previous discussion has highlighted the passive resistance that often occurs among older rural populations, this may have varied outcomes. Although lack of engagement in volunteer structures and community groups may be beneficial for some older adults from the perspective of their individual preferences and needs, it will likely pose issues for the sustainability of wider community groups and activities in rural settings (Skinner et al., 2016a). This will restrict the capacity of more marginalized older adults to access community supports and services that they desire or require. Passive forms of resistance are also problematic where lack of engagement is contextualized as merely a “choice” by local power elites, rather than dissatisfaction with current rural aging processes and outcomes (Warburton et al., 2016).

**Advancing Rural Aging Research, Policy, and Practice**

Taken together, the spaces of rural aging examined in this article contribute to understanding the contested ways in which rural environments are created and the diverse contexts within which aging is experienced. Although our five-part discussion is intended to make the dynamics associated with the development of aging rural spaces more explicit, the risk of over-simplifying and homogenizing the dynamics and processes associated with the development of rural contested spaces in particular places must be acknowledged. The processes illuminated here inevitably will be influenced by local rural specificities and different historical-geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural trajectories; the competing discourses of rural aging will be experienced and represented differently across diverse rural settings and among older adults. The conceptual framing outlined herein nevertheless provides a valuable starting point to interrogate further the diverse, complex, and nuanced ways in which rural spaces in older age are created, confronted, and contested.

As revealed in the discussion presented above, rural aging can be understood as influenced by competing policies,
Table 1. Emergent Questions for Rural Aging Research, Policy, and Practice

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key processes and outcomes</th>
<th>Emergent questions for research</th>
<th>Emergent questions for policy</th>
<th>Emergent questions for practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>Contested spaces of rural aging are created as a result of competing policies and practices relating to healthy aging and rural governmentality, and changing rural demographics</td>
<td>What are the specific points of convergence and difference in relation to rural development and healthy aging policies?</td>
<td>How can rural development and sustainability policy better accommodate the implications of more diverse forms of rural population aging?</td>
<td>How can competing policy discourses be managed within rural health and social care organizations, and community groups?</td>
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<td>Contested spaces of rural aging emerge over competing discourses over the rights to rural symbolic, political, and cultural space in older age</td>
<td>How do these competing discourses over rights manifest among different rural communities, with varied types and levels of rural population aging?</td>
<td>How or where can policy be more explicit in relation to the rights and responsibilities of diverse older adults to rural space?</td>
<td>Who is being disenfranchised through these competing discourses on rights to symbolic, political and cultural spaces in older age?</td>
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<td>Contested spaces of rural aging emerge over competing discourses relating to the right to age in place within rural communities</td>
<td>How is the perceived right to age in place within rural contexts contextualised among different groups of rural older adults, and within different communities?</td>
<td>What is the role of different levels of policy in supporting rural aging in place, and how is this manifested in relation to service and resource allocation at the local level?</td>
<td>Who is responsible for providing specific services and supports to diverse older adults within rural settings, and what is the extent of that responsibility?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contested spaces of rural aging are created through active and passive interactions between diverse older adults, wider community members, rural organizations, and policy</td>
<td>What forms of contestation within rural aging spaces produce positive outcomes for rural older adults and communities, and which generate negative outcomes for specific groups?</td>
<td>How can government planning policies and procedures encourage more active, and less passive forms of contestation among rural older adults and communities?</td>
<td>How do active and passive forms of contestation affect the ability of older adults to receive services, and the ability of rural community organizations to provide appropriate services to older adults?</td>
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<td>Contested spaces of rural aging can both create and reproduce inequity within rural communities for older adults</td>
<td>Which forms of contested space are most problematic in terms of creating and reproducing disadvantage and inequity for rural older adults? Which characteristics of contested spaces of rural aging contribute to enhanced agency among older rural populations?</td>
<td>How can national and sub-national policies better support those who are disenfranchised though contestation practices and processes? How will the increasing contestation of rural spaces of aging impact on rural community and service sustainability?</td>
<td>What organizational, community and individual solutions are put in place to mediate negative outcomes associated with contested space for affected groups of rural older adults?</td>
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engagement) and the sustainability of rural communities (Skinner, 2014; Winterton & Warburton, 2016), a more nuanced understanding is essential in ensuring that the trajectories of rural communities continue to support aging in place for a greater diversity of older adults.

To advance the field of inquiry, Table 1 highlights several ways in which greater attention to the creation of contested spaces can inform rural aging research, policy, and practice. Following Greenfield (2012), articulated as a suite of emergent questions for consideration within rural gerontology, policy discourse, and community leadership, the table provides a contextually sensitive framework for interrogating the implications of contested rural aging spaces for older adults, rural communities, and health policy. For example, the multiple processes and outcomes of creating rural aging spaces leads to new research questions about the manifestation of competing policies, discourses, and practices (e.g., among rural development and healthy aging policy priorities, different rural communities, diverse aging rural populations, and different forms of contestation). They also lead to strategic questions aimed at the development of rural aging policy that accounts for context; for instance, in regard to recognizing diverse forms of rural population aging, the rights and responsibilities of older adults, implications for sustainability, the role of national and sub-national policy in encouraging active forms of contestation and in confronting exclusion and marginalization. Perhaps most constructively, they can be used to ask pragmatic questions about how to improve programs in support of aging in rural communities. In this case, there is a clear need to understand how to manage competing policy discourses, to identify who is being disenfranchised and who is responsible for providing services and supports, to understand how to steer forms of contestation toward appropriate services for older adults, and to support initiatives that mediate negative outcomes.

To conclude, in seeking to advance gerontological scholarship on contexts of aging (see other contributions to this special issue), this article explored how contested spaces of rural aging are created and the implications of these phenomena for the health and wellbeing of older adults, and the sustainability of their communities. The key dynamics of rural aging processes and outcomes articulated above, and our consideration of their implications for research, policy, and practice, provides the foundations for a contextually sensitive framework that is applicable to understanding and addressing the diversity of experiences of and responses to rural aging. Significantly, with subsequent attention to unpacking the elements of place (historical-geographical, socioeconomic, cultural, etc.), this framework is also transferable to other geographically, economically, and socially constructed contexts of aging (such as global, urban, indigenous, gendered, LGBT). In articulating a contextually sensitive approach, the article contributes to critically informed rural gerontology that is ever more relevant in contemporary aging societies.

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Conflict of Interest
The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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