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Social Identity Experiences of Newcomers In Two Australian Small Rural Communities: Working to Belong

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Abstract

Small rural communities need to attract and keep newcomers to maintain population, to retain services and community capacity to revitalise. However, they are also known to commonly resist and exclude newcomers, with existing residents often blaming the newcomers for unsuccessful integration. In this research 89 interviews were conducted in two small rural Australian communities to understand the social experiences of newcomers and the tactics they use to fit in and belong. Social identity theory and three layers of critical discourse analysis were used for analysis. It was found that newcomers actively seek local social connections that affirm self-esteem, inform them of local cultural social codes, including social expectations and hierarchies. Some adopt or adapt to local norms. Some seek to demonstrate social merit through community participation and contributions. However established residents often ignore, minimise, disparage or undermine newcomer efforts. The degree of welcome and social induction found by newcomers shaped their attitudes to the community. An active culture of welcome fostered positive social outcomes.

Keywords: rural newcomers, rural belonging, welcome, rural community, rural identity, rural migration

Expériences d'identité sociale des nouveaux arrivants dans deux petites communautés rurales australiennes : travailler pour appartenir

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Resumé

Les petites collectivités rurales doivent attirer et retenir de nouveaux arrivants pour maintenir la population, conserver les services et la capacité communautaire de se revitaliser. Cependant, elles sont également connues pour résister et exclure les nouveaux arrivants, les résidents existants blâmant souvent les nouveaux arrivants pour une intégration infructueuse. Dans cette recherche, 89 entretiens ont été menés dans deux petites communautés rurales australiennes pour comprendre les expériences sociales des nouveaux arrivants et les tactiques qu'ils utilisent pour s'intégrer et appartenir. La théorie de l'identité sociale et trois couches d'analyse critique du discours ont été utilisées pour l'analyse. Il a été constaté que les nouveaux arrivants recherchent activement des liens sociaux locaux qui affirment l'estime de soi, les informent des codes sociaux culturels locaux, y compris les attentes sociales et les hiérarchies. Certains adoptent ou s'adaptent aux normes locales. Certains cherchent à démontrer leur mérite social par la participation et les contributions de la communauté. Cependant, les résidents établis ignorent, minimisent, dénigrent ou sapent souvent les efforts des nouveaux arrivants. Le degré d'accueil et d'induction sociale trouvé par les nouveaux arrivants a façonné leurs attitudes envers la communauté. Une culture active de l'accueil a favorisé des résultats sociaux positifs.

Mots-clés : nouveaux arrivants ruraux, appartenance rurale, accueil, communauté rurale, identité rurale, migration rurale

1.0 Introduction

For small-town leaders, population sustainability and attracting newcomers to small towns relies upon a suite of services and facilities, including economic opportunity and stability, local environment and lifestyle, positive social connections and a positive culture of tolerance, inclusion and optimistic leadership (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Halstead & Deller, 2015; Morton, 2003; Woolcock, 2001). Community satisfaction through social capital, in friendships and socially affirming interactions is of greater impact than amenity (Ragusa, 2022). Small communities rely on positive social capital to retain their populations, build resilience, and thrive (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015).

Social and economic factors feeding rural decline continue yet city-dwellers still move to the regions (Bourne et al., 2020; Forth & Howell, 2002). Newcomers are drawn to small rural communities for affordable housing, relationships, employment, or aspirations for lifestyle (Butt, 2014; Regional Australia Institute, 2018; Stockdale & Macleod, 2013). They may stay because of cultural and recreational offerings, a sense of safety and a pleasant climate (Whisler et al., 2008). Attracting and retaining newcomers is desirable for revitalisation and resilience (Buikstra et al., 2010; McShane et al., 2016; Plowman et al., 2003). The future of small community viability could therefore rest in the initiatives and welcome extended by existing residents to keep new residents (Lee-Ack, 2008).

Rural communities are known to often be reluctant to embrace newcomers as legitimate residents (Irwin, 2019; Kilpatrick et al., 2011; Patten et al., 2015; Paull, 2009; Paull & Redmond, 2011; McHenry-Sorber & Schaffit, 2015; Waytz & Epley, 2012) even though they need new members for community vibrance and viability. Acceptance and welcome have been explored (Bauer et al., 2019; Costello, 2007; Genareo & Filteau, 2016; Kilpatrick et al., 2011; Redshaw & Ingham, 2018) less often applying social identity. There is no clear definition or consistent framing of what constitutes a newcomer or how long they remain an outsider. Various terms differentiate non-locals from locals, labels indicating inferior stereotypes (Davis et al., 2012; de Rijke, 2012; Obst & White, 2004; Paull & Redmond, 2011). Even when new residents have lived in and contributed to a community for years, they are not necessarily recognised as true ‘locals’(Garbutt, 2011). Kilpatrick et al. (2011) found that some in small communities, newcomers felt they were outsiders even after decades of residence. Established residents attribute responsibility for not fitting in to newcomer disinterest, lack of commitment and character deficiency (Genareo & Filteau, 2016; Jones et al., 2009; van den Hoonaard, 2002). Existing residents apply bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000; Gray & Lawrence, 2002) using their insider knowledge to defend their familiar social boundaries, habits and hierarchies from newcomer disruption and challenge (Ham & Woolcock, 2022; Smith & Krannich, 2000; Swann & Hughes, 2016).

Established residents hold newcomers apart and maintain their social set boundaries even though the small towns need new residents to socially engage (Lake, 2011). New residents are thought disruptive by the established residents who attribute responsibility for not fitting into the community to newcomer deficiencies (Genareo & Filteau, 2016; Jones et al., 2009; van den Hoonaard, 2002). However, is it correct that newcomers make no effort to engage in small town life? Are they responsible for their frequent social isolation? Healthy rural communities need tolerance and inclusive attitudes to successfully collaborate in problem solving, create innovations, reflect, and plan (Caccamo, 2002; Cooke, 2016; Fukuyama, 1995). Specifically, where there is limited exposure to

diverse social categories, there is a tendency to mistrust those from outside *because they are from outside*.

Where a social identity group feels socially threatened, it tends to bond along socio-political divisions, threatening initiatives reliant on participation, cooperation, and collaboration (van Deth & Zmerli, 2009) and externally introduced 'capacity building'. This becomes a cycle of inward-focussed justification of social superiority and relational wall-building that leads to community decline (Lüders et al., 2016). These phenomena of negative social capital are more prevalent in isolated and inward-looking communities (Li, Savage, & Pickles, 2003; Paxton, 2002).

What do newcomers do to find social fulfilment in communities that are not welcoming? This research aimed to (a) understand the motives, initiatives, and experiences of newcomers to small rural communities through the lens of social identity; (b) assess efforts to find social sets where they may affirm esteem and belong; and (c) identify strategies newcomers use to understand and participate in the local social landscape. Social identity theory (SIT) is applied as a novel approach to understanding psychosocial experiences in small rural communities. The findings have implications for those joining small towns as workers or residents, for community leaders and development workers.

1.1 Social Identity and Newcomers

Social identity covers the way that people are influenced by the categorisation of self and others into social sets with particular attributes and explains intergroup and intragroup dynamics (Hogg, 2005; Hogg & Abrams, 1998; Tajfel, 1981). Individuals socially categorise themselves and others (Pelled et al., 1999; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Tracy & Naughton, 2000) seek membership of social groups to achieve esteem and belonging. Each unique social group defines themselves with attributes and actions, representing its *entitativity* and understand and value the material privileges of membership that go with it, membership *valence* (Hogg et al, 2007; Hogg & Abrams, 1998). However, fundamentally, social identity is about social power. It is competitive and fundamental to agency, to being able to express one's own authentic self, and to making a difference. Social group membership curtails or enlivens personal status and social access, according to one's fit and place in the culture and structure of the social landscape of the small town as a social group. Table 1 indicates some of the social identity practices of the established residents towards newcomers, to apply power and retain entitativity and valence of salient identity.

Groups adopt expressions of these dimensions of power to defend and preserve their valence and entitativity (Branscombe et al., 1999; Cikara et al., 2011). Distinctive, homogenous groups with clear structures or high entitativity give clear direction to the members on how to behave, present, and position themselves. Membership requires some degree or at least a perception of compliance if not complete acceptance of a set of defined values, opinions, responses, understanding, and beliefs to conform with a salient social group. Compliance is necessary to establish trust, to belong (Hohman et al., 2017; Haslam et al., 1995). Degrees of conformity with ingroup norms reflect social hierarchy within the social set and depend on what social prototypes are available, individual accessibility and fit (Turner, et al., 1987). People seek to belong to achieve social certainty, knowing where they fit and how to behave. A challenge to familiar identity norms brings social uncertainty and is disruptive (Lüders, 2016).

Table 1. *Summary of Dimensions of Power & Implications for Newcomers*

Dimension of power in social interaction	**How it works**	**Implications for newcomers**
Fundamentals of agency	Being aware they must access or have knowledge of the resources of power to fit in successfully and knowing they don't have that access.	Aware of their vulnerability, outgroup members comply or give a semblance of compliance, to adopt or adapt proactively to local cultures and hierarchies, without the powerful taking any social action to censure (Dowding, 2006)
Structural elements of power	Newcomers experience structural constraints within community—they are not considered equals.	Excluded from particular decision-making arenas by virtue of cultural norms that stereotype newcomers as being improperly positioned to make decisions or voice opinions about the community (Fiske, 2004; Galinsky, 2002; Scott et al., 2011).
Epistemic nature of interaction	To successfully fit in, they must access the local habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), the implicit knowledge of local social norms and narratives that establish local 'reality' that must be drawn upon to understand and interpret actions and implications within a particular social context.	Residents (ingroup) validate a set of stereotypes as incontestable truth, justifying acts of exclusion and withholding recognition. Exclusive knowledge of the way the community works is power. Newcomers are recruited into this epistemic nature of the community, accepting their constrained place as social inferiors.
Social ontology	Social conformity in institutionalised beliefs and actions protects familiar order and social discipline. Residents exercise power and socially censure the non-compliant.	Newcomers self-constrain their behaviours to find a place of social certainty within the socially constructed narrative, the "iron cage" (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Weber, 2011) of how a particular community operates.

For newcomers, knowing the social hierarchies and habits of a social set is essential for inclusion, however these social codes are often invisible to them (Patten et al., 2015). This leaves them socially vulnerable to missteps that affirm negative expectations and stereotypes established by the existing members to distinguish their ingroup boundaries. Newcomers must learn how to present

themselves in a particular social context to comply with local social norms, to fit in and belong, to know how to not cause offence and avoid social policing or exclusion (Clarkson et al., 2013; Clarkson et al., 2017; Combs & Freedman, 2012). The social codes for behavioural norms within a community are telegraphed implicitly in the community's daily social practices, the exchange of incidental anecdotes, the demeanour and behaviours of persons in the community (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hogg & Rinella, 2018; Jimerson & Oware, 2006; Scott, 1990; Tracy & Naughton, 2000).

There is a body of literature that understands the social identity experiences of newcomers in organisational contexts. Newcomer employee performance, satisfaction, commitment, and retention is shaped by their initial experiences within the workplace (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 2007). Influences on newcomer integration include initial expectations, proactive willingness to seek information, the importance of early relationships, and leadership facilitating newcomers' success (Bauer et al., 2019; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2012; Ok & Park, 2018; Saks et al., 2011). Newcomers often recognise that they need to qualify and comply with local norms to become accepted (Täuber & Sassenberg, 2012). Established members find greater comfort and social ease with newcomers similar to familiar local prototypes (Haslam et al., 1995; Hogg, 2005; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2012). Established members conduct a subjective social evaluation of newcomers, applying their inbuilt bias and prejudice, categorising them as inferior outsiders (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; van de Mieroop, 2012) without trust and less perceived credibility (Hogg, 2012a; Tanis & Postimes, 2005). Newcomers respond in corporations with strategies to seek inclusion (Korte, 2009; Korte & Lin, 2013; McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2015; Pickett et al., 2002). They seek to learn local social identity information that must be accessed and interpreted for guidance about local social practices, social groups, and culture (Clarkson et al., 2017; Garbutt, 2009; Hogg, 2018; Linde, 2001). This present research seeks to understand if these organisational social identity findings apply to social life within small rural communities and understand the implications for community capacity and resilience.

2.0 Methods

2.1 Selection of Case Communities

This social identity research uses case studies deriving data from real-life contexts, influences, and complexities rather than manipulated experimental studies. The data collected in 2019, is drawn from structured interviews with 89 new and established members of two anonymous small rural communities in Queensland, Australia, referred to in this study as Jaroville and Tookton. The selected inland rural communities were in dryland agricultural areas with populations under 2,000 and subject to social pressures for change, particularly from an incoming population. Having a small population, the communities were more likely to offer a limited number of possible internal social connections. Small populations intensified the visibility of social dynamics, which were less diluted than in a larger population with more social group choices and greater diversity. The qualities sought in subject communities were that they had a surrounding mixed rural use and sufficient internal and social services to allow for sustainable life without frequent travel beyond the community.

Respondents were identified through a combination of initial community contacts, snowballing, and then targeted selections from a cross-section of the adult population in and near the local town to ensure a representative sample. Consideration was given to various ages, genders, time spent in the community,

and social prototypes, which were identified progressively through the interviews (Maxwell, 2013).

The two selected communities are similar in location, governance, population size, history, and demographics. Neither town has a strongly identified or representative civic leader, such as a mayor. The towns are surrounded by mixed rural activities, including extensive and intensive agricultural production and rural residential areas, and each has sufficient commerce and social services (see Table 2).

Each community has a higher than state median age (37) and is increasing. Table 1 indicates other demographic qualities.

Table 2. *Social Indicators for Study Communities*

	Jaroville	**Tookton**	**State**
Road distance to regional centre (km)	80–85	40–45	
Road distance to state capital (km)	210–20	150–160	
Median age 2016 (y)	45.0	47.0	37.0
Median age 2006 (y)	39.0	43.0	36.0
First Nations background (% of pop.)	2.7	3.1	4.0
Born outside Australia (% of pop.)	3.1	8.4	21.6
Profess no religion (% of pop.)	16.5	20.9	29.2
Median household income ($/wk)	1,121	954	1,402
Post-secondary qualification	28.7	37.2	45.2
Work in agriculture (% of workforce)	36.1	22.5	2.8
Work as managers	23.3	22.5	12.1
Work as professionals	5.8	12.0	19.8
Work as technicians, trades	12.6	12.0	14.3
Town population range	1,500–1,700	2,000–2,200	
Same address 1 year before census	77.5	78.1	72.8
Same address 5 years before census	53.2	53.0	45.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016).

There are some noticeable differences between the two towns. Tookton has a natural amenity with a milder climate, undulating landscapes, recreational forests, and proximity to large water sources. It has a less diverse economic base with the potential to grow tourism. Tookton has an older age profile than Jaroville, including incoming skilled and capable retirees. Of those born overseas and resident in Tookton, approximately 90% come from western European or British colonial countries. Jaroville has a higher population born in diverse locations overseas, drawn by agricultural employment, including a significant group of South-East Asian origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

2.2 Approach to Data Analysis

The analysis examined the internalised beliefs and codes of social conduct implicitly and explicitly expressed in the interviews (Jimerson & Oware, 2006; Kashima et al., 2018). Common themes emerged from the communities. A critical discourse analysis framework (Fairclough, 1992, 2001) was applied to code the transcripts in NVIVO 12. The analysis located patterns and indexical linguistic codes and metaphors as indicators of social identity dynamics (Potter, 1996; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Individual narratives were explored using three overlapping critical discourse perspectives (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009):

- *Linguistic analysis*: identifying referential or nomination strategies, categorisation, labels, metaphors, metonymies, and anecdotes used to classify social groups, and the characterisations, predications, descriptive qualities associated with those labels
- *Macro sociological analysis*: focusing on the interpreted micropolitics, evidence of power and status, justifications for exclusion, exceptions for social inclusion
- *Interpretivist analysis*: narrative themes that provide a framing or perspective to explain and represent community identity as it is reflected, reproduced, and challenged in social identity dynamics.

Findings represented themes of sociocultural dynamics in the communities (Maxwell, 2013).

3.0 Results

3.1 Newcomers Seek to Fit In

Newcomers make an effort to find familiar social interfaces that facilitate connections and esteem. This newcomer particularly sought connection with 'working people' aligning with personal traits and values and so volunteered for a local community organisation:

> You need to be associated with somebody for the town to accept you. I am not 100% sure that [organisation] was the right place but it is somewhere I can volunteer and I feel like I am useful. It is somewhere to start. And I have gotten to know [named people]…helping out when they put things on and some of those people are good working people to know, or have a connection with (JN1911997)

Seeking positive connections to achieve esteem, newcomers may adopt or adapt to local values as a signal of respect and social identity alignment (Dowding, 2006; Täuber & Sassenberg, 2012). In doing so, they may adjust their appearance, speech, social behaviours, and even moderate or develop opinions to demonstrate cultural alignment to local social identity and find acceptance. One resident newcomer spoke of choosing to 'tone down funky city style' to stand out less. Failing to adopt the dominant local social identity narratives and norms identifies individuals as outsiders, reduces legitimacy and trust. Some newcomers learned and demonstrated unique local cultural knowledge, as though they were locals, to show a sign of community membership:

> Our [supermarket)] is a bit of a funny building, and there is a particular way that you line up [there]. I have had to learn it. It does this weird

> snaking sort of thing. And you can tell if someone is not from here because they will line up logically in a straight line instead of doing the 'snake' (laughs). (TN1219198)

Some newcomers signal community belonging by repeating aspects of the local community identity narrative, not within their own experience but loaded with implicit cultural codes. An example of this, in both communities, was the story of local government amalgamations that occurred in 2008, 11 years earlier than this research, when small town local governments were merged into a centralised governance body (Wallace & Dollery, 2018). Several newcomers repeated a local narrative of the original local government's superior performance as though they themselves had experienced it. This newcomer arrived in the community in 2016:

> This town took a hit in 2008. An absolutely huge hit. When…amalgamations happened…it didn't do this town any favours at all. This was a very vibrant town, you know, Council Chambers there had all new equipment. They had a CEO, who, every morning, would drive a different route coming in to work. And if he saw something coming in here, he would pick up the phone to the Works' bloke and say, 'You need to go and fix this' or 'this tree is hanging over on the road' or 'a rubbish bin has fallen over'. That is the way they were. The old-timers say you could go in and sit down and approach them and have a talk about a problem, and [they'd] go and have a look at it with you. Get off their chair and actually go out and have a look. And it had five million dollars in the bank. Right? (JP2939499)

This newcomer repeated the 8-year-old favoured community narrative, which they had never experienced, an insider's narrative signalling community membership. They accepted it as unquestioned fact and transmitted it to others.

3.2 Newcomers Demonstrate Merit

Some newcomers sought to demonstrate merit in community contributions, to achieve esteem, social acceptance and standing. However, newcomer merit threatened locals who often preferred newcomers to accept an inferior social place, not disrupt by challenging the status quo and certainly not seek credit for skill or contribution. Consequently, to manage and contain newcomers their input might be framed as ill-informed, not relevant to the community or disrespectful of established identity norms and hierarchies, as this established resident explained:

> Don't try to come to town and take over, you know what I mean, like I say, like, like…You are a newcomer, you been here 3 years; I been here 60 years, so you don't tell me how, you know what I mean. (JE2993397)

Where newcomers spoke as equals, or with knowledge, or suggested improvements, it was read as disrespect, actively challenging the material or symbolic status of some established residents: "About some of these [new] people who think they are a bit better than other people…It is just raised occasionally, it bubbles up occasionally, but it's not a—I don't know. People talk about it occasionally" (TE3982319).

Newcomers can run into resistance and social censure when they make suggestions that implicitly or directly criticise or challenge the dominant prototype's established interests, positions, perspectives, and customs. An established resident observed:

> And newcomers come in and can make a suggestion, and then that can have that negative impact. It is important to know that in small communities, people are very set in their ways and sometimes just don't like change, even if it is for the better. They don't like to see someone coming in, and they sometimes feel they are losing control, or yeah, there can be some of that, insecurity…people who have been here for such a long time have taken ownership, and they are very passionate. Maybe they feel that they have failed if someone suggests the way they do it isn't good enough. (TE1929699)

Newcomer contributions were resisted and rejected on the basis of their social category, rather than on the merit of their service, suggestion, or contribution. To overcome the lack of local status, some newcomers, especially those with social status in other places, sought to introduce improvements by referring to their professional skills or capacity. They could also refer to knowledge of rules, laws, protocols, and professional processes set aside by the locals, favouring unique or less formal local customs. Conflict and severe social censure of the newcomer often resulted in these situations and became a motive to leave.

Newcomers without local social legitimacy did not have the 'right' to amend established practices or voice an opinion about improvements. Even as elected leaders, newcomers might offend. This newcomer with an elected role of authority sought to introduce new ideas:

> I gave them the survey, and they had never been surveyed before. I had a 76 per cent return rate…And some of the answers were not what [an established resident former office bearer] wanted. And she was really cross. And so were a few other members in the group. They were really cross. (TP1912398)

The locals can interpret new approaches and ideas as an implicit or explicit criticism of historical habits attached to the integrity or social benefit of their identity group or self. An initiative is disempowered by ignoring it or derision. Alternatively, it provokes outrage and censure of the newcomer rather than discussion of their initiative, often framed as locally impractical, a broader disrespect of local traditions or an erosion of the unique community character.

3.3 Newcomer Disillusionment and Burnout

Regular rejection as of effort or of themselves as equals could result in disillusionment and this applied to outgroups as well as newcomers. Newcomers in both communities felt the lack of acknowledgement for their efforts to serve the community as social rejection, and some became fearful of engaging and offering new ideas.

> And on the odd occasion [newcomers] do get burned pretty bad for suggesting new ideas or, god forbid, asking for change…Yeah, it can definitely be hard, and a push and shove here, and the straw that broke the camels' back there, and yeah. Some people move away. Some people just leave all the community groups and isolate themselves away. (TE2952699)

Hearing of social censure for initiatives in the community that were not appreciated, was aversive to further newcomer contribution:

> And it angers me that they think that because they are born here that they have the right to treat people so wrong and so nastily. And you know, and that is probably [why] people out there, people who want to do things, but I know also that they are so filled with fear to take that step. (TP1942699)

Newcomers experiencing negative social responses for their efforts to belong, become critical of the community and withdraw.

3.4 Social Rejection Leads to Newcomer Withdrawal

Newcomers who meet with negative social experiences, being ignored, rejected, or censured through local social behaviours find other ways to meet social needs:

> When I first came here, I joined everything…I think everyone when [they] first move here join everything and then realises that…ok, they can be very cliquey and they become gossipy, and all the rest of it and that's just not me. So I have chosen just to have my few friends…and we all sort of blend in together. (JE11996983)

The established locals defend their social identity hierarchy, use their power to retain the status quo, then remark on newcomers' lack of interest or commitment. This newcomer young resident was highly engaged as a community member and confronted injustice in the way decisions were made with local awards, unfairly privileging particular long resident families. This drew severe social censure resulting in the young resident's departure from that community group and a shrinking social circle:

> I expected to get a lot of backlash and recoil from that…They don't talk to me in the street…[those I offended] are all parents and…so I don't see their children any more....it's not like 'we hate you'…it will be they avoid you in the street. (TN1912198)

These social identity dynamics make it difficult for newcomers to join and contribute to community groups dominated by established residents.

3.5 Finding Other Newcomers and Marginalised Members

When newcomers cannot fit in with established groups, they seek alternative social connections to achieve social needs in private or informal groups with no community involvement or sometimes, complete withdrawal. Some new social groups of newcomers were formalised with dynamic leadership; they were public and visibly engaged in positive community service and weathered targeted criticism and attack, gradually building local credibility with focus on consistent beneficial community service. Other newcomers and the marginalised discretely organised informal gatherings to meet their personal social needs. Such groups were often 'under the radar', and socially dominant locals might not know their existence. Examples included a fitness group that met for running, book clubs in private lounge rooms, a craft group rotating through members' homes, a collective of neighbours that met for Friday night drinks and parent groups supporting each other in friendship.

This research found that many newcomers excluded or outside the local community groups, did not fully accept or integrate local identity narratives and norms, but 'went along to get along' by selectively accommodating local values. They withdrew if they could not integrate the dominant local qualities, values, or beliefs into their self-identity or find themselves an alternative salient social group.

3.6 Social Experience Frames Newcomer Assessment of Community

Newcomers who found quality social connections were actively inducted into the community and quickly developed intense loyalty to it. This connection occurred more easily for newcomers with community links through family, work or schools or those with valued professional roles introduced and welcomed into the community by locals with status. One individual found a social home in a local community group with many other newcomers and did not identify as a newcomer, though resident in the community for less than 5 years:

> The only thing I can tell you about newcomers, having been one, is that it has probably been the easiest place to integrate yourself into. Because I knew nobody when I came up here. The [community group] was a big factor, and I joined the [sports club]. They welcomed you with open arms, and I have some great mates there. Put it this way. I think the integration process here is a hell of a lot easier than many places I have been because it is a small community that welcomes new people. (TN3932398)

> [I found friendship with a respected local] but before that I was here by myself. There were a few short and small periods where it wasn't exactly the happiest, somewhat down in many ways. Dark moments. Slightly depressed moments. (TN2922298)

Finding a positive social interface was essential to belonging for newcomers. There are important bridging individuals in small rural communities with a social network and local knowledge who actively take a kind interest in newcomers and the marginalised. They are accessible, and their role provides a social interface that assists people without local social capital to find

connections and support. As one new resident noted, "You need to be associated with somebody for the town to accept you." (JN1911997). Newcomers with early access to useful and positive social information from a local social connection integrated into the community:

> Well, I felt at home straight away here, to be honest. I had a lot of support from [a local leader] and other people … I settled in fairly well, I thought. And I felt comfortable here right from the get-go. Right from day one. (JN2922597)

An initial experience, positive or negative, can be influential in framing the newcomer's impressions of the community. Those who make positive social connections were more inclined to minimise the disadvantages of small-town life and commit to the community on their terms, frequently through social groups and acts of service that are not necessarily visible to the local residents. Connecting with just one person was enough to change the newcomer's social environment experience positively. Those newcomers receiving local kindness often attached their gratitude to the whole community more broadly. The following individual was shown kindness and assistance in solving a business problem:

> [A local business] just seemed to be able to go out of their way to be of assistance a bit more. Bit more of a personal connection. People want to help you…you are just not one of a thousand people that walk through the door today. (JN1911997)

Newcomer businesspeople who found a local colleague or patron found faster acceptance than those who did not. There was often subtle or overt antagonism if they could not find such connection. This new business owner relied on trade outside the community and found the first months isolating. By chance, they found a positive social connection with another local business owner: "[named person] has been an important connection for me in the community…he has become a good friend. He was a good source of who to talk to about doing certain things in town, who to touch base with" (TN2922298).

Very few community groups actively welcomed and included new people, but the few that did were distinguished by membership growth largely of newcomers and local marginalised:

> What I have been saying [is] they have got to feel accepted, whoever they are…No judgement…When they feel accepted, and they know that even though they do not have the skill of Joe Blow over there…that they are just as valued as anyone, that is an important part. It has got to be inclusive in everything, whatever they do. (TP2929499)

However, few social groups of longstanding residents could keep newcomers as members.

4.0 Discussion

Social identity theory has not been commonly applied to small rural communities to understand the social drivers that influence newcomers' experiences in these communities. This research shows the importance of the same organisational social identity factors in motivating newcomer engagement, the importance of inducting new people into the local social networks and cultures, to help them belong and make a friend." It also highlights the risks of this, in that newcomers to belong, must demonstrate some degree of acceptance of the status quo. They can challenge local norms by their very presence, but newcomers also feel vulnerable, for the same reasons. Not knowing social codes makes it easy to make social missteps, affirming negative stereotypes. Newcomers do often make effort to access information on the local social norms and to show merit as a valued resident through contributions and knowledge, but this is also dependent on their degree of social confidence and willingness or ability to comply. Social confidence can be supported by established residents with personal welcome. When existing residents provide them with support and induction into local social networks it brings mutual benefit and social relief, especially where there is genuine acceptance. Acknowledging and embracing new ideas and input can advantage a community, where combined positively with knowledge of a unique local circumstances. When newcomer efforts to fit in are ignored or criticised, the social resource is lost (Hillman, 2008; Mellander et al., 2011).

Creating positive social experiences is an important influence in persuading newcomers and their families to extend their residence or stay (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018). Newcomers with social confidence are motivated towards membership in small rural communities and seek to find social information and familiar social interfaces (Bauer et al., 2019; Jokisaari & Nurmi, 2012; Ok & Park, 2018; Saks et al., 2011). Newcomers who have experienced marginalisation have less social confidence in seeking membership in groups that may discriminate against them due to perceived or framed differences to the dominant social set. This inhibits action to overcome loneliness. They found a sense of judgement and exclusion disappointing and demoralising and felt helpless to overcome it. It undermined their esteem and resulted in withdrawal from community involvement, thus affirming the established residents' expectations. Or alternatively newcomers integrated a sense of self into new cultural values, accepting a lower social place, being silent or complying to find social safety. Belonging can mean suppressing individuality and alternative values or initiatives, in order to avoid censure. The challenge for small communities is to actively welcome and facilitate newcomer social connections with progressive existing residents, is to seek what newcomers have to offer and make space for their input and ideas.

This research is limited by inferring causal associations that align with social identity theories but rely on participants' openness in their interview responses. It reflects only two communities with no strong civic leaders, at one point in time. Nevertheless, it provides useful insights that may be taken up by community leaders and development practitioners. Leaders may integrate social identity principles into conscious actions to address and mitigate barriers to newcomer social inclusion—reducing often unconscious but deeply influential factors of established resident social resistance to initiatives, innovations and insights newcomers bring to invigorate the community.

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