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Social Innovation in Rural Regions: Older Adults and Creative Community Development*

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ABSTRACT Many so-called structurally disadvantaged rural regions are characterized by an ongoing demographic change, low economic productivity, and an insufficient infrastructure. Paradoxically, citizens of such regions are often urged to address local challenges by developing innovative ideas, products, or services. Innovation is becoming a “message of salvation” and imperative to local action due to a rise of an innovation regime that conceptualizes innovation as reflexive and ubiquitous. Unlike cities, however, disadvantaged rural regions are often seen as not conducive to innovation. And older adults are rarely ever regarded as potential innovators. This article will examine how innovations emerge in disadvantaged rural regions and what role older adults play in this context. It focuses on social innovation which is important for processes of rural renewal. Drawing on insights gained through the “Innovation in Rural Municipalities” research project, the paper illustrates the resourcefulness of older adults in the context of socially innovative community development. Older adults can in fact act as drivers of innovative projects, actively participate in and make use of social innovations. Their specific role, however, depends on their personal motives, community-related interests, and available resources.

Introduction

Many disadvantaged rural regions face economic, demographic, and socio-cultural challenges. These regions lack educational and employment opportunities, which often leads to so-called “brain drain” (Matthiesen 2004) whereby young, educated people move away. This, in turn, means rural regions are increasingly inhabited by older adults, which questions the economic potential of these regions (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Manthorpe and Livsey 2009). As older adults have an increasing need for transport and healthcare services, providing such public services places a growing organizational and financial strain on public administrations (Atterton 2008).

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In order to tackle these and similar challenges, citizens of such regions are often urged to address local challenges by developing innovative ideas, products, or services. Social innovation is now seen as a “message of salvation” (Howaldt and Jacobsen 2010) and almost [as] an “imperative for local actions” (Noack 2015a:17). This is remarkable because disadvantaged rural regions are often considered uncondusive to innovation given their limited technological, economic, and social potentials and supposedly homogeneous and traditionally minded populations (Shucksmith et al. 2009). Moreover, older adults are rarely ever seen as potential drivers of innovative solutions for tackling local challenges (Wegner 2012).

This article reflects on innovation in the context of creative community development in disadvantaged rural regions. It is inspired by Bock (2012), Copus et al. (2013), Neumeier (2012) and Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb (2012), who have identified a certain potential for innovation in these regions: “In reality many rural areas, even remote ones, show evidence of dynamism, innovation and growth, even without policy support” (Copus et al. 2013:122).

The paper also wants to shed light on the role of older adults involved in socially innovative projects.¹ It argues that the resourcefulness of older adults is often overlooked. Older adults can in fact act as drivers of innovative projects, actively participate in and make use of social innovation (Gillwald 2000; Rogers 1995). Their specific role, however, depends on their personal motives, community-related interests, and resources such as specific know-how, access to networks, and social recognition.

In order to examine the role of older adults in the context of socially innovative processes of rural renewal, the article starts with an introduction to current research on social innovation in structurally disadvantaged rural regions. The theoretical perspective chosen by the authors is compatible with the conceptualization of social innovation as a social and communicative construct (Christmann 2016; Knoblauch 2013). This perspective is based on the understanding that today’s society is influenced by an innovation regime that considers innovation to be reflexive and ubiquitous (Hutter et al. 2018). The innovation literature also offers valuable insights that help distinguish actors’ roles in innovation processes (Gillwald 2000; Rogers 1995) and thus help better understand the contributions of older adults (section “Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives on Social Innovation”). The article then goes on to study the innovative potential of older adults. In doing so, the authors elucidate

¹Aging societies are considered one of Europe’s biggest challenges (e.g., 2012 was the EU’s Year for Active Ageing).

how they define older adults and then, review the relevant literature on older adults as resources vs. dependent people (Atterton 2008; Backes 2006) (section “The Potentials of Older Adults as Societal Resources”). As this article builds on the “Innovations in Rural Municipalities: Conditions, Actors and Processes of Creative Community Development” research project, the authors briefly describe its background. They argue that the chosen methodological approach of focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005) allows for a comprehensive account of rural social innovation driven by or involving older adults (section “Re-analyzing Ethnographic Data to Study Older Adults and Rural Social Innovation”). The subsequent section presents empirical data on innovative activities in three rural villages, and reflects on the role of older adults involved in these projects. These villages belong to structurally disadvantaged regions in western Germany (Eifel region in Rhineland Palatinate) and eastern Germany (northern Saxony, southern Brandenburg) (section “Older Adults and Creative Community Development”). The data illustrates the importance of older adults in the context of socially innovative community development (section “Discussion: Motives, Interests and Resources of Older Adults”). However, the extent to which older adults take over different roles depends on their personal motives, community-related interests as well as available resources (section “Conclusion”).

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives on Social Innovation

Creativity and innovation have become ubiquitous throughout society (Hutter et al. 2018); the preference for the new is also virulent in public discourses (Noack 2015a). However, the “creation of novelty is no longer left to chance, ingenious inventors, and the creative habits of specialized fields. Innovations are increasingly driven with purpose, with numerous beneficiaries in mind, and in the context of broad-scale demands for strategic innovation” (Hutter et al. 2018:15). Such reflexive innovation entails the interplay of these practices, orientations and processes, but also their observation, constitution, and control (Hutter et al. 2018:15).

Aside from technological, economic, or digital innovations, processes of social innovation are receiving particular attention (Moulaert et al. 2010; Mulgan and Pulford 2010; Mumford 2002). According to Zapf (1989:177) social innovation constitute “new ways of achieving goals, particularly new ways of organizing, new regulations, new ways of life” with the potential to “alter the direction of social change” (translation by the authors). In this context, “new” means that something is done differently to the way it was done before and unlike customary practices. In addition to a certain degree of novelty, new ideas and practices also have to connect to existing knowledge and practices to gain social acceptance.

Thus, social innovation also implies a recombination of known things (Schumpeter 1964), a re-imagination of what already exists, or an adaptation of elements to different contexts (Gillwald 2000:10f.).

The authors of this article are also influenced by the work of Schwarz, Birke, and Beerheide (2010:174f.), who argue that “social innovations originate from specific actors and constellations of actors and consist of intentional, targeted reconfigurations of social practices at the interfaces between different social contexts and rationalities”. This draws attention toward actors as potential resources for social innovation (Cooke 2003:37). So far, theoretical approaches on social innovation distinguish three main groups of actors: leaders (“innovators”/“pioneers”/“innovation leaders”), implementation partners (“participants”), and recipients (“consumers”/“users”/“adapters”) (Gillwald 2000:25).

Innovation leaders are understood as individuals who have unique, charismatic personalities and who, in the opinion of others, possess leadership skills (Gailing and Ibert 2016). Following Sperber, Moritz, and Hetze (2007:95). Charismatic leaders question established structures and discourses, and can motivate others to engage in processes of renewal and innovation. However, leaders are not only found in powerful political, administrative, or economic positions. Older adults may also act as leaders by pursuing new pathways toward that is, community development (Christmann 2014).

Rogers (1995), meanwhile, reflects on the role that active users and consumers can play by introducing innovative solutions to perceived problems. This phenomenon is being studied in the literature on so-called open or participative innovation (Chesbrough 2003; Pénin, Hussler, and Burger-Helmchen 2011). This illustrates that not only leaders are key to instigating and advancing innovations. After all, participants, users, and/or recipients can become crucial for the recognition and dissemination of new ideas (MacCallum et al. 2009:153).

Rammert (2013) as well as Bock (2012:58) and Cajasanta-Santana (2014:46) adhere to the view that innovation occurs on the actor level but is also embedded in specific social and cultural contexts. Innovation agents must adapt to the given historical, political, economic, and social framework, but are also capable of negotiating, modifying, and reinventing this framework. This may, however, meet fierce opposition and can be accompanied by conflicts. For this reason, innovation agents often struggle with social innovation (Christmann 2019; Neuloh 1977) and have to deal with many different societal interests.

Moreover: Although social innovation “aim at solving problems differently and satisfy needs differently”, Schwarz et al. (2010:174f.) also claim that social innovation “usually have an ambivalent, not necessarily

‘positive’ impact.” Therefore, social innovation does not always create new solutions that are helpful for overcoming conflicts and crises. In contrast, social innovation can also produce new problems. Sometimes they have ambivalent or even negative effects for certain actors (Gillwald 2000:19; Lindhult 2008:44).

While Schwarz et al. (2010), Rammert (2013) as well as Bock (2012:58) and Cajaiba-Santana (2014:46) emphasize the role of actors, practices, and structures in their definition of social innovation, it was Rammert (2013) who developed a concept of societal innovation that goes far beyond this. His societal innovation approach distinguishes three levels of innovation: (1) the semantic level of innovation discourses, (2) the pragmatic level of innovative actions, and (3) the grammatical level of institutions and rules. Semantics refer to the meaning and knowledge of as well as the discourse on innovation. But innovation does not necessarily have to be linguistically explicit, but becomes apparent through certain actions (pragmatic level). The grammatical level, meanwhile, refers to orders, regimes, and regulatory systems which enable and restrict innovation (Rammert 2013).

Taking into consideration theoretical approaches on social innovation, many have argued that social innovation is crucial even in different spatial contexts. With regard to rural regions, they have emphasized that social innovation potentially fosters regional development and structural changes in rural regions (Bock 2012; Bosworth et al. 2016; Dargan and Shucksmith 2008; Lee et al. 2005; Neumeier 2012). This article discusses different roles that older adults can take with regard to innovative community development in rural regions. Yet before doing so, the following section examines the potentials of older adults as societal resources.

The Potentials of Older Adults as Societal Resources

The authors argue that the resourcefulness of older adults is often overlooked in the context of innovative rural development. They claim that older adults can become important players in socially innovative processes in many ways. This raises the question how one defines an older adult. According to the World Health Organization (2001) and with reference to Gorman (1999) and Mamzer (2013), the literature on older adults, meanwhile, offers a range of definitions that variously put forward age (in chronological time), biological health, psychological well-being as well as socially constructed meanings of age, such as social roles assigned to older people, as key indicators. Definitions also differ depending on a society’s culture. Western European communities, for instance, differentiate between so-called third-agers and fourth-agers (Östlund 2011:15). The former are defined as older adults who are

agile, mentally fit and healthy, and who go about their lives largely without requiring assistance. The latter, in contrast, are understood as older adults who (at least partly) depend on external help and whose physical and mental limitations diminish their innovative potential (Östlund 2011). Against this background, we consider an older adult as someone who meets at least one of the following three criteria: (a) the person is 60 years or older, (b) the person is retired (position in the labor market), and (c) the person has a grandchild or several grandchildren (social role in the family).

Since gerontological studies by Atterton (2008), Backes (2006), Burholt and Dobbs (2012), Gallistl (2018) and Wegner (2012) have shown that older adults can play an active role in society after retirement, research on third-agers has become increasingly important. “Many older people [...] are wealthier, healthier and more active than their predecessors. On reaching retirement, many people have built up considerable economic and social resources that they can contribute to the localities in which they live” (Atterton 2008:20). Studies also show that third-agers often start new businesses (Murakami, Gilroy, and Atterton 2009:565), become more attractive to employers (Mamzer 2013:18) and enjoy greater well-being through creative pursuits (Gallistl 2018:93; Noice, Noice, and Kramer 2013). Promoting lifelong learning, creating work environments specifically suited to older adults and actively promoting good health are seen as ways to tap into the innovative potential and productivity of this demographic group (Kruse 2007).

Growing scholarly attention has thus focused on the civic engagement of older adults (Liu and Besser 2003; Skinner et al. 2014). “Levels of participation in voluntary, community and social enterprise activities among older people are increasing” (Atterton 2008:20). In Germany, the engagement of people aged 55+ in such activities has increased significantly over the past 15 years, from 28.4 percent in 1999 to 38.5 percent in 2014 (Vogel, Kausmann, and Hagen 2017).² Older adults invest a lot of time in volunteering, and the most important motives for doing so are to have fun, interact with other people and generations, and to participate in societal co-creation. According to Burholt and Dobbs (2012), Terrill and Gillifer (2010) “keeping busy” is one explanation for older adults’ activism. But while the “activity theory” to participation (Havighurst 1963) suggest that a certain level of activity makes for a satisfying life after retirement (Terrill and Gillifer 2010; Witcher et al.

²In addition to good health, the level of education is important when it comes to the involvement of elderly citizens. The engagement rate increases in relation to levels of education (Vogel et al. 2017).

2007), the “continuity theory” (Atchley 1971) holds that it is the meaning of the activity instead of the level of activity that is most relevant.

Jones and Heley (2016) as well as Skinner et al. (2014) are among the few studying the links between older adults’ civic engagement and rural development. They show that older residents influence community development processes in rural regions through participation, voluntary work, and by taking leadership (Skinner et al. 2014:418). Nevertheless, the researchers do not show any interest in the role of older adults in processes of rural social innovation. Not even Steiner (2016) or Steiner and Teasdale (2019), who investigate in what sense social innovation, and social enterprises in particular, can help address challenges posed by an aging rural population, are interested in the role of older adults when it comes to creative community development.

Given that “[m]any older people are active [and] thus contributing to the ‘social capital’ of rural communities” (Atterton 2008:20) it is surprising that the literature on aging populations in rural settings still considers aging “a pathological ‘problem’ and links the aging process to decline and dependency” (Burholt and Dobbs 2012:442). This narrow focus on the dependency and frailty of older adults is still maintained (Powell and Owen 2005) although disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961), according to which older people gradually disengage from previous social roles and relationships, has been discredited many times (Cornwell, Laumann, and Schumm 2008). “Social perceptions of the ageing in large part rely on outdated models and assumptions about the labour force, retirement and pensions. Twenty-first century demography demands a new outlook of aging populations as drivers of economic growth and innovation.” (OECD 2014:2) Consequently, emerging models on aging refer to the relation between older adults and cognitive and personal growth (McGuire, Boyd, and Tedrick 2013; OECD 2014).

In this sense, the authors of this study argue that older adults can act as drivers of innovative projects, take over the role of active participants and be recipients/users of rural social innovation (Gillwald 2000; Rogers 1995). In the following, it will be shown how these insights were generated in the context of the “Innovation in Rural Municipalities. Conditions, Actors and Processes of Creative Community Development” research project. Previously, the methodological approach of focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005) will be introduced.

Re-analyzing Ethnographic Data to Study Older Adults and Rural Social Innovation

This article presents findings of the “Innovations in Rural Municipalities. Conditions, Actors and Processes of Creative Community Development”

research project, which was carried out at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space between January 2015 and December 2018. It investigated six municipalities in rural regions characterized by ailing economies, shrinking populations and insufficient social infrastructure (so-called structurally disadvantaged regions) in eastern and western Germany. There, actors from different societal fields (politics, public administration, business and/or civil society) pursued creative solutions to local problems and initiated socially innovative projects to foster community development. While all six communities face similar challenges (shrinking populations, a rural settlement structure and peripheral location), they displayed a different historical development due to their location in eastern and western Germany, respectively.

The research project used the method of focused ethnography (Knoblauch 2005), which unlike conventional ethnography (Malinowski 1922), entails a less time-consuming observation of the research subject. Such a focused approach allows for a comprehensive (though not holistic) process-oriented exploration of innovations. “In addition, the lack of intensity of subjective experience in conventional ethnography is compensated for by the large amount of data and the intensity and scrutiny of data analysis.” (Knoblauch 2005) Hence, focused ethnography does not seek to test hypotheses. Instead, it pursues an inductive approach which is highly appropriate for studying new research topics like innovations in rural regions and thus, specifically, the role of older adults in the context of those processes.

The research project carried out participant observations, problem-centered interviews, analyzed documents, and conducted quantitative household surveys. The added value of such a triangulation of data is that the research subject can be examined from different perspectives and a critical distance. This research method provides the possibility of investigating ongoing innovations or ones that might not yet have been implemented and institutionalized in practice.³ In addition, triangulation sheds light on sources of resistance, controversies, conflicts, and power struggles which are often part and parcel of innovative processes and mostly go unnoticed in reconstructive analysis (Noack 2015b).

Initially, older adults *were not* the primary focus of the project. However, over time it became obvious that older adults variously contributed to socially innovative projects in all rural communities studied. For this reason, parts of data collected between 2014 and 2018 (nearly 70 problem-centered interviews, dozens of participant observations with more than

³Thus, not every idea which is deemed to be innovative by the involved actors, media representatives, public authorities or funding programs ultimately develops into a successful social innovation (Noack 2015b).

100 pages of memos and minutes, many hundreds of public documents, as well as quantitative household surveys in all of the six villages) has been re-analyzed with regard to the role of older adults in the context of rural social innovation.

In the context of this extensive body of ethnographic data, the authors particularly focused on the precise (re-)analysis and interpretation of nine problem-centered interviews with a length of about 1 to 2 hours that were audio recorded and transcribed as text. Six of these interviews were conducted with older adults; the other three were carried out to learn what leaders and other participants in socially innovative projects think of older adults' activism. The questions raised in the interviews focused on the development, pathways and outcomes of socially innovative projects. In addition, the interviews also touched on the spatial identification, intentions/motives, and engagement of the actors involved.

Furthermore, the authors analyzed nearly 100 documents published in newspapers, online magazines, and on websites that reported on the innovative projects, giving both an internal and external perspective on the endeavors. The document analysis provides information on the extent to which a socially innovative initiative and its older adults as potential key protagonists experience social acceptance, but also whether they encounter resistance articulated by the public. Therewith, document analysis uncovers various facets of innovation discourses in order to relate them to the interview statements in terms of increasing their validity.

In terms of data analysis and interpretation, qualitative content analysis, and grounded theory were used to (re-)construct the roles of older adults in processes of rural social innovation. With regard to the consistency and validity of the interpretation, the method of communicative validation (Stracke 2009) was used. In our case, the communicative validation was implemented through the mutual control of the researchers (one researcher in the empirical field, the other with a necessary distance to the field), who compared their analyses to reach agreement about codes in order to group similar ones into categories. Furthermore, some of the older key protagonists were re-interviewed and confronted with the results to check their validity.

In the following, three of the six originally investigated structurally disadvantaged rural villages are presented. These three case studies were chosen because they illustrate different roles that older adults can play in social innovation projects. Furthermore, the case studies shed light on older adults' motives, goals, and available resources.

Older Adults and Creative Community Development

The German municipalities of Kremmen (in Rhineland-Palatinate's Eifel region), Dehlitz (northern Saxony) and Krugau (Lower Lusatia in Brandenburg) are located in peripheral regions with less than 200 inhabitants per square kilometer (BBSR 2015). The Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR) classifies them as structurally disadvantaged regions as they struggle with weak economies, peripheral locations and population shrinkage. Nevertheless, some locals have initiated innovative projects to tackle these problems, overcome negative discourses and halt the downward spiral (Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan 2010:15). Among them were older adults from various societal fields. The location of the three case studies in Germany is illustrated by Figure 1.

The following analysis presents empirical data on innovative activities by older adults in three structurally weak rural villages. It highlights the resourcefulness of older adults, who act as drivers of innovative projects, actively participate in or benefit from social innovation (Gillwald 2000; Rogers 1995). However, their specific role is also highly dependent on their individual motives, community-related interests as well as resources with regard to know-how, network contacts, and social recognition.

An Older Innovation Leader and Key Figure

Kremmen is a rural municipality located in the Eifel, a sparsely populated mountain range in the southern part of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate. Once, Kremmen was a flourishing tourist destination. However, over the past two decades, the municipality with a population of 900 has been confronted with a drop in tourism as well as with continuous economic and demographic decline. As a result, the municipality faces a high vacancy rate, and a sense of resignation is rife among its residents.

Given these challenges, Andreas Fellner (Kremmen's mayor), Heidi Hellmann (a local hotelier) and Kurt Menge (a frequent tourist) launched an art and culture initiative in 2012. They assumed that no conventional approach would suffice to improve the situation of retailers and hoteliers and dispel the widespread feeling of apathy among locals. Hence, the initiators promoted experimental, unconventional culture projects, and events (such as a shop-within-a-shop concept for handicrafts, a hop festival, or readings of regional crime stories) to strengthen the local economy, and nurture a sense of local identity. To this end, they invited various artists and designers to showcase their artworks and handicrafts in vacant properties and public spaces.

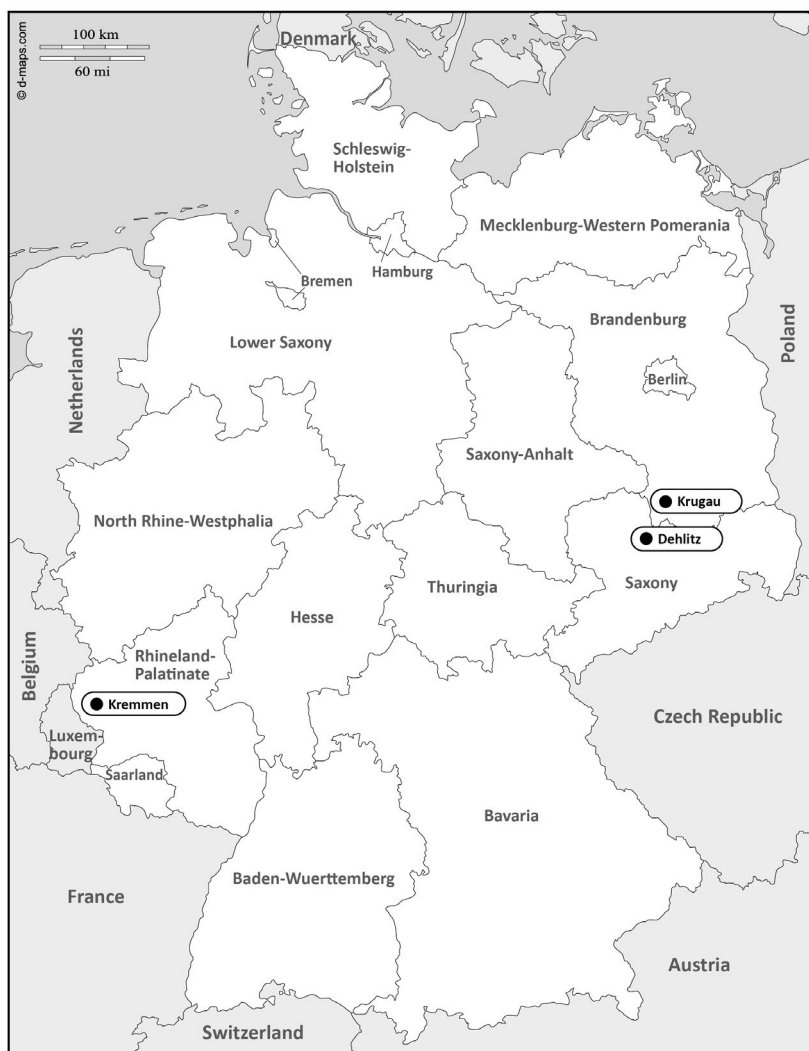


Figure 1. The Location of the Case Studies in Germany. Source: Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space.

Andreas Fellner, who was one of the initiators, played a crucial role in the socially innovative project. Although he grew up in Kremmen, Fellner spent 30 years of his life in different regions of Germany and around the world. After retiring in 2008, the 67-year-old returned to his home town that he describes as a place with “a lot of feeling, a lot of wounds,

injuries, trauma, illness, mental illness, collective depression, but also with a lot of potential” (Andreas Fellner, translation by the authors). Building on this somber yet also potential-oriented perspective, Fellner followed community-related interests when he sought to motivate locals, telling them to “rock the village [by...] rolling up our sleeves” (Andreas Fellner, translation by the authors).

Fellner not only became the mayor of Kremmen but also an important “key figure” (Gailing and Ibert 2016) in driving socially innovative community development. Since he was familiar with the potential of art and culture for revitalizing rural regions, and with the concept of temporarily using abandoned buildings (Noack and Federwisch 2019), he applied these approaches to the rural Eifel region. In doing so, he made use of his position as mayor of Kremmen, his multiple network contacts and integration into comprehensive social networks. Fellner reached out to other politicians, administrative representatives, local businesses, foundations, researchers, artists, and especially citizens in order to acquire (financial) support and to gain professional input for the art and culture initiative.

Due to Fellner’s social embeddedness in a supporting network he also had an impact on the public discourse about Kremmen. The pensioner developed a narrative that emphasized the potentials of the municipality and thereby engendered a “spirit of optimism” (local newspaper, translation by the authors). According to a local journalist, it was chiefly Fellner who created a positive discourse about Kremmen in the media: “The mayor is good at selling the village’s efforts [...] which, of course, influences how it is perceived from the outside, which in turn gives Kremmen greater self-confidence. [...] And I believe that something has already changed in the media’s perception of Kremmen” (Local journalist, translation by the authors).

This does not mean, however, that Fellner was immune to criticism or did not become embroiled in conflicts. In contrast, Fellner’s efforts to promote the project drew criticism. “You cannot be present everywhere, [...] there are limits to that. We do not have to be known across the nation. We are glad if at least there is some progress here. We also like giving advice to others but we do not know if that will be a success” (Representative of Kremmen local council, translation by the authors). However, Fellner was quite aware of such criticism. To him, what mattered was to keep the media’s attention focused on Kremmen. “It was important that the municipality became a topic of conversation because something truly unique happened here that never existed in the region before. [...] Critics fell silent and the new cultural initiative established a social innovation” (Andreas Fellner, translation by the authors).

Today, only few shops remain vacant and the traditional hotel in the village center has found a new investor. “Since the new initiative was launched, more properties have been sold than in the entire 15 years before. Building sites in the newly developing area are being marketed continuously. Young couples and families are moving to Kremmen” (Andreas Fellner, translation by the authors). The project created an awareness among locals for the municipality’s vacancy problem and the potential of innovative artistic solutions. In addition, the socially innovative initiative became awarded as a model for a successful rural revitalization and gained widespread attention and imitation.

Fellner played an important role by convincing locals and the media that art and culture projects can serve as an unconventional approach for revitalizing rural spaces. By identifying with the village, adopting a potential-oriented perspective and following community-related interests, he was able to build a critical mass needed for change (Kristof 2010).⁴ He also made use of his function as a mayor and concomitant resources such as specific know-how, network contacts, and broad social recognition from the villagers.

Older Adults as Active Participants in a Rural Innovation Initiative

The village of Dehlitz is situated on the edge of Grüne Heide nature reserve in northern Saxony and home to 130 residents. The region is characterized by agriculture, pronounced population decline and low purchasing power. The municipality that Dehlitz is associated with saw its population drop by about 20 percent between 1995 and 2014. And it is projected to further decline until 2025 (Office for Statistics of Saxony 2016). According to the BBSR index (2015), the community is classified as rural and very peripheral.

The civic engagement of Dehlitz residents began when a new European Union guideline on the compulsory purification of wastewater became effective for all households in 2015. While other rural communities opted for costly individual wastewater disposal systems, the residents of Dehlitz pursued an alternative approach. They agreed to set up a jointly run sewage treatment plant, with kept down costs for each individual household.

As residents of Dehlitz, we have been looking for and found an innovative, cost-effective, environmentally friendly, and sustainable solution for wastewater disposal. Together with a local

⁴Nevertheless, the influence of elderly citizens on rural regions also depends on institutional or sociospatial structures and path dependencies (David 1994). These structural conditions can enable or hinder certain actions, and might even lead to the failure of innovative projects.

farmer, we also developed and implemented a concept for the local heating supply of our village, in order to keep our rural region, but especially our village, [...] attractive and livable in the future. (Association homepage, translation by the authors)

Engineer Marleen Winter became the lead figure developing Dehlitz' sewage treatment plant. Winter, a scientist working at a university in the state of Saxony, became a key figure (Gailing and Ibert 2016) not only because of her extensive specialist knowledge in the areas of hydraulic engineering and settlement economics. But also because of the trust she earned from villagers and because of her important contacts to governmental actors in the state of Saxony. Thanks to a citizens' association founded in 2010, Winter was able to motivate villagers to get involved. Furthermore, due to her influential contacts she was able to have the project declared a Saxony model project worthy of special funding.

Aside from Marleen Winter, older villagers played a crucial role in the conception and implementation of the sewage treatment plant project. The now 80-year-old Manfred Britz was the one who initiated the undertaking. "I said, Marleen, you know what? We could actually do this here [the sanitation] together. It will be cheaper" (Manfred Britz, translation by the authors). Since sprightly Manfred Britz has long been actively involved in village life (not least as disc jockey), locals like Marleen Winter quickly warmed to his idea of a village sewage treatment plant.

With the project moving ahead, more and more older villagers became interested and involved in the wastewater treatment plant endeavor. Several older men, for example, excavated duct shafts and laid down pipes, thereby helping push down costs and save time. "We started in 2011 with the [...] first half of the village. Our old men here really did the main work on the project. They were all over 70" (Björn Feld, project protagonist, translation by the authors). The older women, meanwhile, ensured that the workers were getting properly fed, which kept them motivated. "For example, we also have single women, older ones, who [...] prepared breakfast for the men or cooked lunch." (Maria Winkel, project protagonist, translation by the authors).

The participation of older adults in the project earned them social recognition: "The older adults [were] fully behind it. They said, okay, we're going through this now, we're behind it. And one could see that the whole lower village was built by them." (Marleen Winter, translation by the authors). The sewage treatment project also tapped into the villagers' hands-on mentality, which had originally developed through previous collaborative projects like the construction of a fire station or the installation of antenna technology during socialist times in the German

Democratic Republic (GDR). Over the course of the project “sometimes three generations [...] worked together” (Marleen Winter, translation by the authors). This earned older adults significant respect and fostered intergenerational solidarity. “This significantly strengthened social cohesion in the village. Our village is growing. Three young families have decided to move to Dehlitz and are planning to build homes here due to the favorable conditions” (Association homepage, translation by the authors).

The project, which won an innovation award in a nationwide competition, is also semantically (Rammert 2013) denoted as such by the protagonists themselves. “The innovation is quite simple: we mobilized the whole village for it [and the project] we did it on our own [...]. It was made possible through the initiative of the citizens. That is, in my view, the innovative aspect [and] why we won the award” (Björn Feld, project protagonist, translation by the authors). German media has repeatedly praised Dehlitz for its social innovation and for adopting an exemplary approach for dealing with (demographic) problems in rural regions.

The case study of Dehlitz highlights the role of older adults as active participants in processes of creative community development. Aside from 80-year-old project co-initiator Manfred Britz, many other older citizens also greatly contributed to the sewage treatment plant project by dedicating their time and know-how, which earned them social recognition from younger villagers. This strengthened everyone’s sense of local identity, and fostered solidarity between the generations. The project helped reduce costs for individual households and served the entire community.

Older Adults as Recipients in a Rural Innovation Initiative

Lower Lusatia, a region in the south of the state of Brandenburg, is characterized by extensive open-cast coal mining. This is also true for Krugau, a rural municipality in Lower Lusatia with a long history of coal mining. In the aftermath of German reunification in 1990, however, Lower Lusatia in general and Krugau in particular lost their industrial importance. When large, formerly state-owned companies (VEB Volkseigene Betriebe) were shut down, only a few small and medium-sized enterprises remained, which were unable to absorb the increasing number of unemployed. As a result of this extensive economic transformation, Krugau lost a third of its population (3,800 ↘ 2,600 inhabitants) (Office for Statistics of Berlin-Brandenburg 2019), with those remaining struggling with unemployment and lacking a sense of local identity.

For this reason, Germany's Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy promoted a series of so-called narrative salons in several municipalities like Krugau. The idea was developed by a Berlin-based company and is inspired by the Jewish Sabbath during which family members gather and share their experiences with one another. "The narrative salon is a place to recall and preserve collective experiences, memories, interpretations and opinions about important events in a lively way. In narrative salons, groups of people with shared experiences meet to reflect on their experiences under the supervision of a salonniere" (Richter and Rohnstock 2016:84; translation by the authors). Aside from this, the narrative salon also provides a space "to jointly develop new ideas" and encourage locals to "promote innovative projects" (Berlin-based company, translation by the authors).

While narrative salons are suitable for people of all ages, they are popular with older adults, for example in the context of memory training schemes (Richter and Rohnstock 2016:84). "Older patients with a cognitive disorder, in particular Alzheimer's disease, are known to have a short-term memory deficiency, while their long-term memory often works well. For this reason, biographical work is a proven method for helping such patients recall familiar memories." (Homepage Berlin-based company, translation by the authors).

In the case of Krugau's narrative salon, those older adults involved were mainly interested in the community aspect of the gatherings and in fostering a sense of local identity. "Then you meet people again you hardly do so in such big places. But when everyone is back, it is always like a community that shares the same interests" (Marta Blum, older attendee; translation by the authors). Participants focused on recalling the industrial past of the village as well as what it was like living in the GDR.

However, the narrative salon did not only help the recipients recall the village history. The format also provided a platform for representatives of a defunct power station (built in the 1920s and representative of Krugau's industrial period) and of a community theater (built in the 1950s and representative of Krugau's socialist past) to overcome their long-standing disagreement about public funding for reconstruction and renovation efforts. "The narrative salon, I must say, ended the conflict. That, in my opinion [...] is its greatest achievement" (Herbert Blum, older attendee; translation by the authors).

Originally, the narrative salons addressed all generations of people living in Krugau. This approach was successful in one case (in the local youth club), whereas most of the time only older adults participated. However, it contributed to greater intergenerational understanding.

“The narrative salon with our teenagers in the youth club came as a surprise. The narrative salon was so vivid, it was so lovely for us older adults to learn what the young generation thinks and how they want to live their lives. We want the youth to stay here. And they feel attached to Krugau” (Hanna Nowack, older attendee; translation by the authors). In the opinion of older adults who mainly participated in the salon, the format allowed old and young to talk about and share their different perspectives. This is confirmed by Heinz Kühn, an older adult who took part: “I would have liked to talk to young people even earlier.”

According to citizens like 73-year-old Hanna Nowack, the narrative salon also had an effect on village life. “The narrative salon brought the community together. Newcomers got to know how great things are, how many inhabitants participate in the clubs and get involved. The narrative salon in Krugau affected a lot of things.” (Hanna Nowack, older attendee, translation by the authors). Although her assessment can be questioned as only 50 villagers (2 percent of Krugau’s population) attended the salon, long-term resident Hanna Nowack nevertheless felt invigorated by the format’s community-building character. This is why she agreed to support the continuation of the narrative salon initiative after regular funding ceased and the Berlin-based company withdrew. Mrs Nowack and another Krugau local, Bente Schwarz, were thus trained as salonnières. Salonnières provide guidance when groups of people with shared experiences meet to reflect on these in narrative salons.

Due to the workload involved, however, Bente Schwarz gave up this role after having helped organize two self-organized narrative salons. And Hanna Nowack was unable to replace her for health reasons. “Many ask me, is it still going on or is it over now? At the moment I’m not in good health. I was in hospital.” (Hanna Nowack, older attendee, translation by the authors). Mrs Nowack, who gained local recognition for acting as a salonnière, retired from this position which left the initiative without its key ambassador. No more narrative salons were held.

In retrospect, most older salon recipients were driven by the desire to foster a local sense of identity by recalling the village’s industrial past. They contributed to the project by dedicating their time and know-how. Yet their interest in revitalizing village life through an innovative project was limited. Although the narrative salon only attracted younger participants when one session was held at the local youth club, it nevertheless helped promote intergenerational dialogue, according to the older adults involved. Yet apart from temporarily promoting intergenerational dialogue and fostering social cohesion among salon recipients, the narrative salon project failed to gain momentum and help revitalize Krugau. This novel idea did not grow into a social innovation, even though the

ministry and the initiating actors from Berlin recognized its potential to do so and semantically denoted the project as such (Rammert 2013).

Discussion: Motives, Interests and Resources of Older Adults

It is obvious that social motives and community-related interests are important when it comes to the engagement of older adults in creative community development. The older adults discussed in this paper were less interested in accomplishing personal goals and instead are motivated by collective notions of public welfare, sociability, and cooperation (Vogel et al. 2017:8f.). They also helped foster a local sense of identity and promote social cohesion among participants and/or residents, thus potentially strengthening the “social capital of rural communities” (Atterton 2008:20). This is what was already indicated by Atchley (1971) in the continuity theory according to which it is the meaning of the activity instead of the level of activity (“activity theory”; see Havighurst 1963; Terrill and Gillifer 2010; Witcher et al. 2007) that is the most relevant explanation of citizens’ activism by older adults. Thus, research on the role of older adults in rural social innovation should not only focus on what they are doing but also on why they are doing it (Burholt and Dobbs 2012:438) as it was special for this paper.

Comparing these three case studies also made clear that older adults possess a variety of resources useful for creative community development. In the case of Kremmen, mayor Andreas Fellner capitalized on his leadership resources as mayor which includes extensive network contacts in various societal fields to generate additional financial support and to draw on professional advice. “Without effective networks [...], it is very difficult to connect ideas, resources and people, which [...] is a pre-condition for the development and growth of social innovations” (Dobele 2015:233). In the case of Dehlitz, many older adults contributed extensive amounts of time and know-how to the project. Doing so earned them social recognition from other villagers. And in the case of Krugau’s narrative salons, which were supposed to appeal to villagers of all ages, it was mainly people over 60 who participated. They were motivated by wanting to reconstruct the region’s industrial past as the core of identity work.

Consequently, older adults have relevant practical knowledge, considerable amounts of free time and network resources with which they can influence village life. And they often enjoy social recognition when they actively engage in rural innovation projects. This thesis can be supported by the studies of Atterton (2008), Backes (2006), Gallistl (2018), Murakami et al. (2009), Noice et al. (2013) as well as Wegner (2012) who

document that older adults start new initiatives after retirement and follow creative pursuits due to their innovative potential and productivity.

This perspective on older adults as charismatic figures and people committed in socially innovative initiatives with a multitude of human and social resources contradicts the popular view that rural regions are characterized by limited social potentials and traditionally minded inhabitants (Shucksmith et al. 2009). It also due to those people—that probably would be civically engaged no matter where they were to live, but intendedly choose to live in rural settings maintaining a local sense of pride and identity – that rural areas can also show dynamic and innovative developments (Copus et al. 2013) and hegemonic knowledge about aging rural regions will be questioned.

Conclusion

The fact that many rural communities are rapidly aging makes it more likely that older adults will become involved in problem-solving initiatives. They also do so in the context of a reflexive and ubiquitous innovation regime (Hutter et al. 2018), which goes along with demands for strategic innovation for all population groups and increasingly requires older adults to engage in innovative renewal efforts. This reinforces the need for empirical-based scientific studies on the role of older adults in processes of creative community development. This article can be seen as a contribution to a better understanding of the older adults' roles in the context of rural social innovation. It is thus part of an emerging body of research literature that shifts the view from older adults as being dependent to the recognition of older adults as active citizens with productive potentials.

Ethnographic data on three structurally disadvantaged villages in eastern and western Germany illustrated that older adults are actively engaged in socially innovative community development projects, thereby adopting different roles. While some act as innovation leaders, others are active participants or mere recipients/beneficiaries of social innovation (Gillwald 2000; Rogers 1995). However, which role older adults adopt is highly dependent on their respective motives, community-related interests, and personal resources. The older adults portrayed in this article possessed considerable know-how and free time, and were able to capitalize extensive networks in order to make an impact in their municipalities. These findings enhance theories on social innovation agency by taking into consideration a broader set of innovative actors. They are also relevant for practitioners who seek innovative solutions for regions affected by demographic change. Nevertheless, one should stress that this finding applies primarily to third-agers.

Against this background, research on rural social innovation should pay greater attention to the potentials of older adults. They should be seen as “beneficial rather than burdensome” (Murakami et al. 2009:564), and as “contributors to society and not simply as service consumers” (Burholt and Dobbs 2012:433). This requires moving away from the dominant view of older adults purely as beneficiaries of innovations (innovation FOR older adults) (Djellal and Galloij 2007; Laperche et al. 2018) to a perspective that considers innovation BY older adults. And it includes a more age-positive mindset, where “older people’s voices [...] are adequately heard” (Murakami et al. 2009:565). The here presented arguments consider this perspective as important and should be regarded as inductively developed structural hypotheses that require further testing⁵ in future research.

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⁵In view of three ethnographically studied rural communities, the here presented arguments seem to be rather generalizing. Based on an inductive research approach, however, they serve to shed light on a research gap in the sense that the role of older adults in rural social innovation processes thus far have not been examined in detail and requires further empirical testing.

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