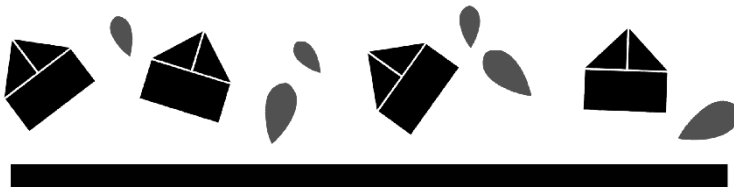


*Reframing rural governance:
gerontocratic expressions
of socio-ecological resilience*



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Abstract: This paper contributes to a developing literature which explores the role of elder community networks in supporting rural governance. In response to current austerity politics within the UK it is argued that the formal and informal networks utilised and enacted by older people are fundamental in enabling local governance to adequately function. Further, the paper explores the ways in which these civic engagements by older residents can be understood as performances of resilience. The foci of the resilience spaces in this paper are the rural Parish Councils, local community action groups and environmental campaign organisations who undertake a range of local activities. These both replace services lost through austerity cuts and raise awareness of these changes. As these civic groups are often led by local elders, we argue that what has now developed in response to austerity politics are rural gerontocracies. Using empirical fieldwork, which explored local water resources management issues in three interconnected rural UK villages, the paper examines how the development and transmission of rural socio-ecological resilience by older people provides a critical reinterpretation of what is understood by the resilient subject, to recognise the pivotal role of burgeoning gerontocracies in rural environments.

Keywords: Gerontocracies, socio-ecological resilience, local governance, rural networks, United Kingdom.

Reestructurar la gobernanza rural: expresiones gerontocráticas de resiliencia socioecológica

Resumen: Este documento contribuye al desarrollo de la literatura sobre el papel de las redes comunitarias de personas mayores en la gobernanza rural. En respuesta a la actual política de austeridad en el Reino Unido, se argumenta que las redes formales e informales utilizadas y promulgadas por las personas mayores son fundamentales para permitir que la gobernanza local funcione adecuadamente. Además, en el documento exploramos las formas en que estos compromisos cívicos de los residentes mayores pueden ser entendidos como actuaciones de resiliencia. Los focos de atención de los espacios de resiliencia en este documento son los consejos parroquiales rurales, los grupos de acción comunitaria local y las organizaciones de campañas medioambientales que llevan a cabo diversas actividades locales. Todos ellos sustituyen a los servicios perdidos por los recortes económicos y financieros, y aumentan la concienciación sobre estos cambios. Como estos grupos cívicos, a menudo, son liderados por jubilados residentes en el espacio rural locales, argumentamos que lo que ahora se ha desarrollado en respuesta a las políticas de austeridad son las "gerontocracias rurales". Utilizando un amplio trabajo de campo empírico, organizado alrededor de los problemas de gestión de los recursos hídricos locales en tres aldeas rurales interconectadas del Reino Unido, a continuación exponemos cómo el desarrollo y la transmisión de la resiliencia socio-ecológica rural por parte de las personas mayores, proporciona una reinterpretación crítica de lo que es entendido por el sujeto resiliente, para reconocer el papel fundamental de las gerontocracias emergentes en los ambientes rurales.

Palabras clave: Gerontocracias, resiliencia socio-ecológica, gobernanza local, redes rurales, Reino Unido.

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Introduction

'Resilience' lies at the heart of contemporary United Kingdom (UK) government policy, framed around community preparedness to "threats and hazards" (Cabinet Office, 2011, p.5). Some, such as Kitson, Martin and Tyler (2011), have suggested that this is a direct response to a new 'austerity' politics. They suggest that the emphasis on building community resilience has deepened as the state has devolved its activities. This has led to central government delegating its responsibility for a range of resilience activities within local communities. Orientated around developing local resilience, these activities include flood response, neighbourhood planning, the funding and provisioning of emergency services amongst others (Sage, Fussey and Dainty, 2015). It is argued that a new form of governmentality, particularly a neoliberal governmentality, has been created that operates at a specific scale (Sage *et al.*, 2015; Joseph, 2013), a phenomenon that Mackinnon and Derickson have described as "the spatial politics and associated implications of resilience discourse" (2013, p. 254).

Governance theorists have termed this technique 'responsibilisation' (Peeters, 2013) through which the state nudges, encourages or incentivises citizens to become involved individually or collaboratively with finding solutions for a range of local social issues. Resilient behaviours and actions, as a trope of responsibilisation, shifts the location of agency from a top-down provision of government to a bottom-up resource that then resides in a local community. This radical change in spatial scale also, necessarily, entails a shift in power dynamics. Resilience becomes a politically

weighted term, as the impacts of externally generated and driven macro events are expected to be managed and mitigated at the micro scale. Social and environmental resilience are fused together within the ambit of an anonymised, generic and yet contested (Wilson, 2010) understanding of community.

As greater responsibilities for policy delivery are handed to communities through local governance structures and new planning frameworks, e.g. the Localism Act 2011 and the 2018 National Policy Planning Framework, (see Cabinet Office, 2010, 2011; MHCLG, 2018), the role of Parish Councils is increasing in influence and impact. Parish Councils are, in effect, the lowest tier of local civic governance in England. Councillor posts are voluntary, yet selection is through an election process, with only local residents eligible. Parish Councils' remit are to serve the needs of their local community of residents. Parish Council membership has an average age of 60 years (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2012, p. 36), 15 years older than the median age of the 2014 UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Data is scarce on rural parish councillor demographics, but they are highly likely to reflect the age profile of rural settings which are "disproportionately elderly" (Kinsella, 2001, p. 315). This discrepancy between the younger working adults and the more civically active older retired adults reflect wider patterns of local political engagement (Biggs, 2001) in response to social policy shifts. There is, in effect, a gerontocracy operating at this micro scale; decision-making and action are undertaken in the main by older members of the community. We are presented then with a gerontocracy tasked with operationalising community resilience and this has important civic implications in terms of inequalities of democratic participation in an ageing society (Berry, 2012). A gerontocracy can be understood as a political elite populated mainly by elders, generally deemed as people of 55 years of age and above. Care must be given to interrogate the ways in which the term 'gerontocracy' is often presented negatively in the literature, framed as the political dominance of an introspective and conservative cohort. Rather it is suggested here that civic engagement strategies led by energised, skilled local elders have the potential to be hugely beneficial to communities, particularly within rural spaces impacted by austerity measures.

This paper utilises data captured through empirical fieldwork to explore these issues in more detail. The first aim is to understand how gerontocratic performances and actions may shape a particular kind of community network resilience; and how this supports or negates responses to government policy at a local scale. The second, and related aim, is to explore how these various forms of gerontocratic activity enrich our understanding when considering presentations of socio-ecological resilience

within the literature. The paper opens with a literature review on debates surrounding pluralities of meaning with regards to socio-ecological resilient actors and embedded agency in rural settings to then consider rural resilience and local governance. The paper then utilises empirical fieldwork, focusing on community responses to water resources management issues within three waterside rural villages, and a review and discussion of the case study results. Water resources management is explicitly used as the focus to contextualise resilience issues at the micro level due to its universal impact on all sectors, and ages, of rural communities.

Socio-ecological resilience – emergences of understanding and actions

Much theoretical work has been undertaken exploring the contribution that resilience as a concept for understanding systemic change can make to social science (Adger, 2000; Davidson, 2010; Davoudi *et al.*, 2012; Folke, Colding and Berkes, 2003; Holling and Gunderson, 2002). Resilience has swiftly become a useful concept through which to explore human-nature interdependencies. Moving on from a strictly ecological theorisation which considered thresholds and recovery phases in complex, dynamic ecosystems, scholars have sought to understand resilience within human contexts. This has led to a 'second phase' of resilience theory, termed socio-ecological resilience. In this new context the adaptive capacity of socio (or social)-ecological resilience systems and their responses over time and at different scales, has demonstrated the need to think about social and environmental relationships in tandem. Resilience as a lens of analysis expands to include any human and more-than-human interdependencies. This opens up the sites of resilient responses to include personal resilience, whether mental, physical or social (Ungar, 2012), institutional resilience at multiple scales (Shaw, 2012), disaster management (Davoudi *et al.*, 2012) and financial systems (Peria, 2001) amongst others. In many ways resilience has replaced 'sustainability' as the lens with which to unpick complex, dynamic social and ecological interactions. This emergent paradigm repositions resilience not as a fixed target to attain, but as an ongoing process, due to the open, dynamic nature of the systems under analysis (Kim and Lim, 2016).

Adger's work has proved particularly insightful to the development of the social-ecological resilience literature. In particular, and over time, Adger's work has increasingly focused on natural resource dependent communities to understand the interplay between individuals, social groupings and communities (2000), to explore the dynamic between resilience and vulnerability. For Adger it is social capital that is the essential, integral ingredient which shapes an individual, group or community's ability to influence resilient outcomes. Adger extended the analysis to connect people with their lived environment but with humans as the agents of change; providing a persuasive anthropocentric component to the debate (Adger, 2006).

This perspective also resonates with Elinor Ostrom's research (1999) on communal behaviours and actions with regards to natural resource management practices. For Ostrom embedded knowledges regarding sustainable practices are rooted within the lived experience within one's environment. This connection of social and ecological resilience – how individuals, families, groups, communities respond and manage change both between themselves and with regards to the ecosystems and environments they are connected with, and depend upon – widens and deepens the analysis. Wilson (2015) has termed this the social resilience paradigm. Within this perspective the focus lies on issues of agency; that human agency is the element which, as Davidson states (2010, p.1142-1143), "distinguishes social systems from ecosystems". Throughout, people and place are at the heart of the analysis.

Embedded agency and pragmatic resiliencies in rural communities

Central to the socio-ecological resilience literature, and to the UK government's focus on localism, is the performance of the 'resilient' subject. For resilience to flourish the subject must exhibit some form of agency which enables these actors to champion their own individual capacities and to connect with others. Cinderby, Haq, Cambridge and Lock (2015) utilise Callaghan and Colton's (2008) pyramid of community capital and resilience to explore how six key community assets (economic, built, cultural, social, natural and human) interconnect in dynamic interplay to enrich individual and collective lives. Although Cinderby *et al.*'s work provides a fascinating overview of a Participatory Action Research community project's life cycle, its analysis fails to

engage with detailing the characteristics of a resilient subject. Instead we are signposted towards the importance of "community salesmen" or "mavens" (2015, p. 1267) rather than provided with an explanation of who was involved with their project and their reasons for participation.

The literature then reveals that more fieldwork is necessary to identify resilient subjects and their reasons for action, particularly in a rural context. Within the UK over the last twenty years responses to rural flooding have initiated a growing body of research regarding community resilience. Sarah Whatmore's work has explored the nuances of community-level knowledge and expertise around local resources (Whatmore, 2009; Lane *et al.*, 2011) to interrogate the ways in which local co-produced solutions to flooding informs our understandings of the wealth of vernacular knowledge that exists around water resources. McEwan, Hughes, Bek and Rosenberg's 2014 work thinks widely around the importance that landscape, and expressions of place, play with regards to formations of the self and articulations of individual agency that arise from this. These can be thought of in terms of what Wilson (2015, p.237) has described as "encoded" learning, whereby specific knowledge related to a particular environment is shared within a community, leading to embedded agency within those community members. How this agency adapts to change seems to be a key facet of resilience.

However, the idea of capacities for civic action residing in rural places, is challenged by the stark realities of population change. An issue faced in many rural places is that of ageing, specifically the increase of older people living in rural communities (Scharf, Walsh and O'Shea, 2016) and demographic changes predicted to be experienced in Europe as a result of the rate of youth out-migration overtaking that of in-migration by older groups (Burholt and Dobbs, 2012). Given the expanding responsibilities of Parish Councils, it would seem that there are important political socio-spatial implications of population ageing. The International Rural Ageing Project (1999), an expert review of rural ageing, found that older citizens were an untapped resource, their contributions to effective rural policy and planning often overlooked in favour of a view of the rural elderly as service consumers instead of active citizens (see also, Munoz *et al.*, 2014). However, there is a continued absence of research on the participation of older people in civic engagement activities and policy-making (Burholt and Dobbs, 2012), making any systematic assessment of the involvement of the elderly in community resilience difficult to assess.

Scharf *et al.* (2016) provide a detailed synopsis of current rural gerontology research which they attribute to three factors: a renaissance of "environmental gerontology" (2016, p. 51) within social gerontocracy; the recognised impacts of

globalisation and lastly the continued disparity in rural livelihoods compared with urban communities. Evidence suggests that there is a growing recognition that the rural is not a static place in terms of elder populations. Rather, in-migration after retirement attracts an older cohort of new community members bringing with them new skill sets and a willingness to participate and engage in civic and social activities (Glasgow and Brown, 2012). This alerts us to the need for gerontocratic scholarship which is pivoted on robust empirical research, not predicated on assumptions regarding inherent rural elder vulnerability. Roberts and Townsend (2016) highlight the adaptive capacities of rural communities. Yet little attention has been paid to the concept of the types of political power older people influence in rural spaces.

An ageing and expanding rural demographic, along with a recognition of elder civic engagement in political and civic processes, leads us to argue that a rise in rural gerontocracies are a feature of localism endeavours. Given the range of organisations and institutions which are engaged with governance practises we can also reimagine gerontocracies as operating at a variety of scales. Berry (2012) presents an older cohort in many European parliaments and local government as a catastrophic political time bomb. These views are supported by a range of political commentators and scholars who present elder politicians and governance practitioners as risk averse (Torres-Gil and Spencer-Suarez, 2014), economically stagnant (Sinn and Uebelmesser, 2003), prone to cognitive impairment (Bessner and Walsh, 2018) and unable or unwilling to think beyond their own age specific social needs. Bessner and Walsh suggest various remedies such as lowering the age of suffrage or improving youth political organisation participation rates. What these perspectives reveal is a deep-seated bias against elders, using often inflammatory rhetoric and scant data to evidence these assertions.

Given the push within a Localism Act (HM Government, 2011) framing for communities to define and enact their own local resilience strategies, coupled with an ageing rural population within the UK, it is not unreasonable to surmise that over time parish councillors and civic volunteers will face more and more pressure to take on greater governance responsibilities. Gerontocratic practice is therefore a cornerstone of enacting resilience strategies. What we don't know yet is what that really looks like in action. We aim to close this knowledge gap with the research presented within this paper. The next section of the paper outlines the fieldwork undertaken to explore this in more detail.

The fieldwork

The data used within this paper is drawn from a larger study that was undertaken between September 2015 and September 2016. Located within three rural waterside villages, midway along the River Adur catchment in West Sussex, UK, the empirical fieldwork research aim was to understand community responses to changing water environments. Explicit within this research was an aim to understand how 'resilience' was both interpreted by a range of governance and civic actors and actually enacted on site by community members. The backdrop to the research was informed by the UK's Localism Act 2014 which shifts the onus of responsibility for a range of management issues, including diverse water management concerns involving land drainage and highways maintenance, from local authorities to local communities. Further, the rolling back of local Internal Drainage Boards throughout the mid 2010's had also caused the UK environmental regulatory authority, the Environment Agency, to withdraw their involvement in smaller watercourse management – leaving drainage and localized flood risk management to landowners; often unaware of their responsibilities. At a macro scale the issue of climate change impacts, and the ways in which water is moving about the landscape in less predictable ways, was also interrogated. The research was funded by the University of Brighton, and supported by the Daphne Jackson Trust, and complied fully with both organizations' ethical research stipulations.

Qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were selected as the most suitable method to collect data, enabling participants to provide more emphasis on areas of their life and civic participation that they were most concerned with. Respondents were asked to talk about their local water environments, leading to an open, generative interviewing format, lasting an hour on average. In all thirty interviews were conducted over the course of the whole research. Using water resource management issues as the framing for the research meant that a wide range of participants with different interests and skills sets could engage with the discussions, an approach which focused on environmental rather than overtly political issues to widen the range of people who would engage in the research. Water resource management issues can mean flood risk prevention, drinking water quality, environmental management, protection and conservation as well as accessing and enjoying local waterscapes.

The River Adur catchment was selected for the study. Located in the county of West Sussex, adjacent to the South Downs National Park in South East England, it is mainly rural, though only approximately 50 kilometres from London. The area is populated with small villages and larger market towns with most of the local economy supported by farming, small businesses and tourism generated by visitors to the National Park. The catchment's villages differ from the local towns as they have a higher number of retired residents, aged sixty plus, encompassing a diversity of socio-demographics with a mixed housing stock of both large detached homes and smaller former social housing properties. Many of the respondents interviewed had retired to the villages because of the beautiful countryside.

The study site, just within the tidal stretch of the river midway along the catchment, is comprised of three closely located waterside villages: Steyning; Upper Beeding; and Bramber. Survey participants were asked to share with the researchers their experiences of changing water environments within their villages, and their responses or actions to these changes. These participants were recruited on the basis that they lived or worked in the villages and had some interest, understanding or role, in local water resources management. Consequently, emergency services providers, business owners, parish councillors, farmers, community volunteers, planning officers, householders, property developers, writers and historians were amongst the cohort of participants who were approached and took part in the one to one semi structured interviews. No level of expertise in water resources management was required; simply an interest in local water matters past, present and future.

Contacts were made within the study area through generating contacts with community archive and heritage sites. These initial inroads into finding out about the life of the local communities' water resources then began to uncover contact points for those people and organisations who were involved in dialogues about water. Respondents were asked to talk about their interest in their local water environments, leading to an open, generative interviewing format, lasting an hour on average. In all thirty interviews were conducted over the course of the research. Of these, twenty two were conducted with participants aged 55 and over; capturing those who were either at retirement age, and those who had chosen to retire from paid employment.

Interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. First order analysis categorised the data into groupings such as flooding, drainage, pollution, access, management and governance. Understanding where water 'sits' within people's everyday lives will have direct relevance for how water is managed at a river catchment or 'micro' level, and for a wider macro perspective for planning around

critical infrastructures. The research explored how living and working in a landscape can shape our understandings of change in our natural environment.

The research used the term 'resilience' as a conceptual lens for contextualising the responses to changes in water environments. As a means to uncover how resilience is understood and employed by communities, the research focused on a small section of a river corridor to begin to map the various spatial and temporal relationships between citizens and their immediate water resources. Through examining linked communities, in this case connected by the river itself and also through shared economic and highway resources, shared water resource management administrative and regulatory institutions, the aim was to pinpoint the actions, people, processes and behaviours which would be indicative of resilient responses or assemblages of performance. The research was predicated of no fixed interpretation of resilience, but instead sought to ask respondents themselves what they understood by the term within the context of changing water conditions.

Results

Over the twelve-month span of the interview process what became clear is the way in which government policy has used the term resilience as a factotum to deliver a wide range of resource reallocation and redistribution of governance responsibilities, often to the detriment of local governance structures' abilities to undertake and deliver services.

*Table 1:
Detail of fieldwork participants
(with those aged 54 and under in italics)*

Interview number	Organisation/ perspective	Key concerns	Where do participants locate resilience?
1.	Conservation	Wildlife, rewilding	Ecological
2.	Councillor	Drainage	Financial and policy
3.	Conservation	Wildlife	Ecological/ Community
4, 5.	Farmers (x 2 i.e group interview)	Flooding from building development, Rainfall perturbations associated with climate change, food security	Governance
6.	Environmental	Rainfall, water conservation, society attitudes to the environment	Attitudinal
7, 8.	Local flood committee (x 2)	Flooding	Domestic level, community involvement to support individuals
9.	Householder	Rainfall	Business as usual
10,11.	Building development (x 2)	Success of project, climate change, affordable housing	New technologies
12.	Environmental	Water quality, water quantity	Governance
13.	Householder	Historical changes to river valley	Community
14.	Environmental	Rainfall, water company responsiveness	Private sector
15,16,17.	Householders (x 3)	Historical experience, local council involvement, drainage	Community
18,19.	Residents' Action group (x 2)	Drainage, road flooding, parish and local council activity, land ownership and management	Community, local governance
20.	Local Business	Water quality, water pricing	Governance, private sector
21.	Councillor	Land fill leading to water pollution	Governance, private sector, community
22.	Estate Manager	Localised water management, community relations, climate change effects on people and the environment	Attitudinal, community involvement to support individuals, governance
23,24.	Parish Councillor & Conservation volunteer	Drainage, governance, parish and local council activity, road flooding. Water quality	Financial, policy, wildlife
25.	Retired Southern Water	Historical experience, local council involvement, drainage, flooding, comprehensive water management	Governance, financing, expertise, dominance of policy agenda towards the environment.
26.	Drainage Engineer	Drainage, planning, governance, parish and local council activity, flooding.	Governance, parish councils, local expertise

27.	Planning Authority Representative	Planning, sustainability, environment	Governance, national policy
28.	Householder	Environment, sustainability	Human capacity
29.	County Council Civil contingencies	Planning, flooding, community, emergency services, localism	Governance, localism, community.
30.	Local Authority Councillor	Planning, flooding, community, localism, environment, economy, housing, transport	Governance, local policy, community

The elder respondents were involved, as Table 1 shows, in a range of governance activities which focus on local resilience. Some are official governance roles, such as the local authority councillor and parish councillors involved with financial decision making and resourcing. Some have retired from water resources management roles but keep a watching brief. Others are involved in community organisations, such as the flood action group, the local residents' campaign group or are environmental activists. There are also outlier respondents such as a waterside business owner and an architectural practise seeking to regenerate a former riverine asset. All provided new insights into gerontocratic expressions of rural socio-ecological resilience.

Connected lives

"They don't live here, they sleep here" [retired drainage engineer]

The quotation above is taken from a respondent who had spent all of his working life in one of the villages. His family and his working life were embedded with the landscape. He did not present an idealised version of village life, but his comments inferred that, in reversal of concepts of ageing, it is the young in the village who had become invisible: they were either in their cars commuting, or at home recovering from the working week. They were not connected or engaged with the life of the village.

This connectivity is particularly poignant for this interviewee who, after a lifetime of physical engagement with the landscape, and as a team leader of drainage workers, now was wheelchair bound and had limitations regarding communicating due to Parkinson's disease. Yet his critical faculties were just as keen as ever. The younger village cohort's lack of connectivity he viewed as partly choice, and also as a symptom of the pressures of modern life to consume. For our interviewee his

contribution is dispersed – his knowledge, experience, stories, increasingly locked in within his body takes a new direction as we can 'read' him through his effect on the landscape – his raised flood banks, his grips diverting water off the road and into ditches, his culverts. Part of this resilience work is to take the time to read the landscape, much like a text, to retrieve the lost or fading knowledges embedded within the gerontocratic legacy. One respondent, a drainage officer, confirmed how computer modelling was no substitute for local knowledge regarding the combined effects of groundwater, rainfall, topography, hard-standing and soil profile:

This is why I like to think I'm still employed here...because I've been here a few years I've got the local knowledge...we've got examples of areas in flood zone 1 (less than a 1:1000 chance of flooding) but which have a history of flooding from overland surface water flows, problems with the local ditch network, things like that and it's with that local knowledge that I can inform any perspective applicants.

He went further to say that these anomalies were mapped by the drainage team. The problem lay not in recording these highly specific issues – but in retrieving them, as a high turnover of staff, or continual restructuring within local government meant that a detailed handover process was unlikely to occur. We have then a combination of lost knowledges – fading with the life history of the 'taskscape' and filed away as a result of rapid institutional and personnel change. They are replaced, or overlaid, with the developing knowledges of new incumbents. This 'grey power' citizenry offers a new direction for our understanding of social-ecological resilience, as they offer a lifetime's experience and memories of how local government used to work when well resourced.

As one respondent stated:

... community is all that matters because I feel disempowered with the Government, totally disempowered, I, I mean I will vote always but I don't think my vote counts for anything, erm, and a lot of us I'm sure feel like that but I do have a modicum of influence in this area, not a huge amount because the law is actually, seems to be against individuals for, that's another thing, there's been a big issue here, erm, but there, we do have some influence here.

Connectivity to both a similar age demographic and to a wider span of community networks is obviously one aspect of volunteerism, particularly within rural settings. Given the 'in-migration' patterns of villagers who are, 'relatively affluent and

well connected' there are aspirations concerning making like-minded friends and serving a useful purpose against a backdrop of lifelong working and separated families. Gallent also argues that there is a tendency in Parish Councils for cliques to develop from social networks to the dominance of interest group affiliation which can skew the direction of collective decision making: "Parish council members tended to be the archetypal 'active citizens' who were involved not only in the council itself but in a range of other groups: local history or conservation societies, sports and youth clubs, or groups for parents or older residents" (Gallent, 2013, p.286).

Yet the field work, again, highlighted something 'other' at play. This other is the mindful volunteering which is a directed act or performance of agency, directly responding to the recognition that the state is no longer able, some would argue willing, to provide support in times of crisis. It is this difference on which the gerontocracy argument in this paper rests. Volunteerism by an elder cohort is not a gerontocratic act, nor forms a gerontocracy. What makes the gerontocracy is the manner in which a political process, and forms of governance, are deliberately utilised by an elder cohort to provide resources and support policy decisions which significantly benefit their own needs and desires. This is not to say there is unanimity of vision. Rather, there is a collection of individual needs served through a collective endeavour whose endpoint is to replace the lack of governance, even lack of cohesive community, that is perceived to be the new normal.

For one set of respondents, a couple who had run a business in one of the villages for thirty five years and who had built a home after retirement next to a small stream in their large garden, this intricate relationship between their life and their environment changed. Having lived in the village for twenty years their perspective towards civic life and resilience was deeply impacted by flooding around and in their home in 2011, when both were in their late 60s. Not only the shock of flooding initiated a change but also the financial impacts – their insurance bills quadrupled and they noted that their old home (they had moved into a new build in their garden and sold their former home adjacent to theirs), had been put on the market several times but potential buyers had pulled out during each sale. They identified this as a result of the flooding: "They're trying to sell it and they've had three sale agreed signs up and all removed and we believe, certainly the first two were to do with insurance and inability to get insurance". Their presentation of life post-flooding was wrought with uncertainty and a recognition that there was to be no practical support from any governance agency: "And it is, gradually becoming possibly more of a concern as time goes on, I suppose partly because we're getting older, probably". Against this backdrop they can be seen though to have deliberately regained control over their lives in

response to these events. They installed flood protection barriers, raised the height of the banks between their house and the stream and joined the Parish Council, forming part of their flood defence group. This gives them first access to inflatable boats, sandbags and up to date information on rising water levels:

INT: So would you say then that your involvement in the local flood committee was prompted by your experience and not wishing anyone else to have to go through what you've been through or just different?

M: I think it's just self-preservation as much as anything, yeah, because, erm, I don't, I don't really want to be deeply involved in it, I like, I'm quite happy to help but I do also appreciate that because our house is at about the lowest point if there's going to be a problem it's going to start with me so I don't want to be going out looking after other people.

From a position of vulnerability they have asserted their resilience, both through researching ways to practically protect their home and developing new knowledges around circumventing higher insurance rates as a result. Through joining the Parish Council they connect with other neighbours prone to flooding and have an input regarding planning applications which may wellacerbate flooding events through increased hard standing runoff.

A long-standing village resident, of over forty years, has been actively campaigning against and raising awareness around the poorly constructed multiple land fill sites around his home, leading to a wider awareness of incremental cuts to local services. Over the years he has noted the ebb and flow of local interest in environmental issues. Further, he details how the sense of community has also changed over that time:

Well who's going to do it? You know, it's not, you try and find people, even to sit on the parish council, yeah? You know, we could, technically we've got vacancies for two or three or four people, you know, we're under, we just can't, there isn't the, there isn't the community spirit, you know, people now. I think they, you know, it's not the same as it was when we were kids, you know.

Another Parish Councillor found that her awareness of local issues only came to the fore once she was involved in Parish Council work: and now feels morally obligated to remain as a councillor as so few other residents are willing to engage with what she describes as: "a complicated, time consuming role". Having joined to

keep active and learn about the local area as a retiree in-migrant, she has become politicised as the true enormity of austerity cuts has become clear:

I see it as a delegation of their (the County Council's) responsibilities, whereby there's a pot of money that only the most proactive and able (Parish) councils with a bit of oomph about them will spot. But then you're completely responsible for it, even if you know nothing about, say, drainage. It's a bit scary but money seemed to be so tight there seemed to be no other way to get the money.

As she details, had she not joined the Parish Council she would have remained unaware of the scale of delegated responsibility now resting with this tier of local governance. As she recognises, the issues that she is engaged with in her portfolio of 'Planning and Highways and Lighting' – reduced Highways Agency work, the roll back of Local Authority responsibility for drainage management and flood prevention – together with the Council's wider brief, such as the cutting of local services for the young and the disabled, would have not affected her retired life. Contrary to Berry's (2012) depiction of a 'grey power' which is dominated by a self-satisfying grey agenda, instead we also see a form of political awakening brought on through retirement and the opportunity to get involved with community networks. The elders cannot be presumed to just give knowledge – they are also developing new knowledges in response to the availability of new time and a willingness to socially network as a result of in-migration patterns to particular types of rural settings; the relatively affluent and well connected.

Explored from a purely pragmatic perspective, the idea of a gerontocracy as dominated by the needs of the elderly is a reversal of what the fieldwork reveals. Rather than the elders dominating local governance structures from some form of passive intent to pass the time, or to take an interest in only policies that address their needs as elders, they have instead used these structures in an attempt to reclaim control and direction over a political environment which would otherwise potentially leave them side-lined and marginalised. They also see this marginalisation affecting their children and their grandchildren, with more financial and housing stresses preventing them from forming an environmental awareness. The same respondent goes on:

...people are under so much pressure, I see it with my daughters, it's awful, so much pressure to, to conform, to do this, to do that and so they tend to be more tunnel-visioned, they don't have the awareness, you'd think wouldn't you, with all, with technology and all the information that we have, that in fact we'd be so knowledgeable that we'd be doing the right thing all the time for our

environment? But no, it's the reverse actually, people just, my daughters can't cope with it, not with little kids.

Discussion

The thinktank Intergenerational Fairness (IF) 2012 report, *The Rise of the Gerontocracy*, (Berry, 2012) explored if age has an influence on policy bias. Addressing the 'intergenerational democratic deficit' report roots the debate around the predisposition of an elder cohort both to vote, and to themselves be forwarded as candidates in democratic elected processes. Democracy therefore, according to the IF's report's author Craig Berry, is ruled by the old, for the old, excluding the needs, opinions and participation of the young. Berry's analysis, also talks of the apathetic nature of younger citizens leading to the potential scenario of the rise of 'grey power' leading to political parties creating policy that is tailored towards elders. There is then, an inherent pessimism when the term 'gerontocracy' is used. There is a presumption that this will lead to policies only tailored towards the elderly, leaving younger adults, as a minority of the voting population, both in real terms and in terms of actual participation, at a disadvantage. From our rural settings perspective, this argument would create a scenario more acute in its discrepancy between younger and older cohorts.

Yet the fieldwork reveals that this 'grey power' model is not reflected in the experiences of the rural elderly interviewed. We must also be careful not to use demographics to strip away the complexities of individual lives. As Davidson argues in a response to Berry, "there is an inability to see through age as constituting the only variable that matters in explaining an older voter's identity, values and behaviour and the resultant constant need to push back against this stripping away of the identity and complexity of older cohorts" (Davidson, 2012, p.728). Individuals are not reducible to a date of birth. Utilising Ingold's imaginary of the 'taskscape' (2002), we can argue that we are the sum of our lived experience shaped in part by the environment and the landscape that we, in turn, have shaped with our life. In this view elder actors are not a single-minded homogeneous mass, but in many respects the ideal civic actors to support in politically challenging times, given their breadth of knowledge and experience.

We can see that throughout the resilience literature there is an emphasis on localism, on agency, of the engaged resilient actor-citizen. These attributes are

associated with vitality and vigour, associational strength and a motivation that is associated with community mindedness. Yet the fieldwork revealed something more complex, more nuanced, with the starting point leading from what Harvey has termed 'fractionality'. Cloke and Goodwin (1992) noted the way in which economic reconfiguration and a creation of a rural 'idyll' reshaped the nature of rural spatiality. Commuting, home working and leisure economies rather than agricultural economies have altered expectations of where and how income is generated. Further, there are demographic shifts highlighting a trend for newly retired people, often couples, to migrate to rural villages, bringing with them experiences, skill sets and lifestyle expectations which may differ from longstanding rural elder populations (Glasgow and Brown, 2012).

Many of the respondents taking part in the interviews had retired to the villages after a long working life, with no family or other ties to the area. These respondents were drawn to the area for leisure, for wildlife or for more property space. They all were drawn to be engaged with some form of civic engagement: conservation work, Parish Council work, awareness raising on green issues, neighbourhood schemes and youth work. Munoz *et al.*'s 2014 study on volunteering in rural communities highlighted that "strong community activism was indicated, as up to 75 % of older people were involved in some formal participation" (Munoz *et al.*, 2014, p. 209). Curry, Burholt and Hagan Hennessy (2014) suggest that such volunteering practices are opportunities for "increased social interaction and enhanced self-esteem" (Curry *et al.*, 2014, p. 35) when engaging with mutually beneficial practices.

This activism also operates outside of formal governance structures such as the Parish Council. Several of the respondents, again all elders, were involved in conservation, environmental awareness raising or green campaigning. They were engaged in a range of activities which include community swaps to rehome unwanted items rather than sending them to landfill, renaturalising rivers through the introduction of river gravel beds to support spawning trout, educational meetings to discuss environmental concerns and youth activity work to support their learning about the natural world. For all of the respondents in this network this latent activism was enabled through retirement. The opportunities this new time resource gave them opened up opportunities to explore, learn, connect and be active with others in their local rural area. Their varied responses demonstrated a need to make a contribution to both their local environment and for the wide range of community members who would benefit from their activity – young families, anglers, school age children, walkers, bird watchers and they themselves "the retired".

Involving themselves in Parish Council work is a form of political activism against policies which strip back finances, support and reparation for elders and the wider community. The irony lies in that they perform resilience through the auspices of policies which threaten to make them more vulnerable. The 'community resilience' policy approach argues for community self-reliance, but asks those who both need support and are least able to give support to provide the backbone for decision-making and enacting.

Davidson (2012, p. 737) contends "it is rational to expect that voters perceive their individual interest intertwined with the happiness and welfare of their own extended families, local community and social networks". When we think back to our initial respondents' perspective of "they don't live here, they just sleep here", we see wider structural issues at play. Increasingly in rural settings it is only an older cohort that can afford to own their homes. Their retirement locks them in to their locality. As younger families experience the fractionality that Cloke and Goodwin (1992) speak of, leading to them necessarily demonstrating flexibility around moving for job demands and less intra-generational living arrangements, we see that resilience becomes for elder residents a facet of life tied to their age, their homes and their immediate environment. Halfacree (2006) suggests that the spatiality that is created is resonant of, and responsive to, a different set of productive tasks which shape space. As these tasks are economically unproductive inasmuch as they are unpaid, unremunerated and in some senses incalculable, they move beyond cost-benefit analysis, they sit away from any supply-demand curve. Yet they are invisible but essential for the continuation of rural communities. Sinn and Uebelmesser's (2003) vision of a gerontocracy that skews politics against the young and threatens democratic representation belies the reality of a networked group of residents who, though utilising some governance structures for their own purposes and to enhance their own social-ecological resilience, are committed and involved in such a way so as to ensure that the whole community benefits.

Conclusion

Citizenship and community are contested concepts which in many ways provide a shorthand to describe connections between people and institutions, particularly within the resilience literature. As this paper demonstrates, in many ways

these terms fail to capture the nuances of individual agency that are performed within these networks in order to secure both individual resilience and that within the individual's immediate environment. Further, rural elders have responded to changing governance and ecological environments through purposive actions, such as joining Parish Councils and taking part in a wide variety of local voluntary activities and organised groups as part of an engaged response.

Reflecting back to the aims of our research it is possible to say that the agency of these rural elders is not simply 'filling in' the gaps left by a retreating state under the auspices of austerity. Rather these elders are raising awareness of government and governance retraction through awareness raising, campaigning and by undertaking high visibility community actions such as street cleaning, drainage maintenance and riverside rewilding to demonstrate a lack of state participation and funding. Using social media as a means to publicise their activities ensure a wider visibility than just within their rural locality. Understanding these practices as forms of socio-ecological resilience enables us to see these rural elders as resourceful, imaginative and pragmatic. Their collective and individual endeavours assert their agency, at a time in their lives when others, including many members of the academic community, still view them as vulnerable and depicted as service users rather than service providers. Appreciating these grassroots gerontocratic practices as socio-resilience strategies enables us to both refine our understanding of rural elders' response to austerity and to develop an awareness of how much affective labour these citizens provide in this latter post-work stage of their lives. These disparate networking activities provide rural elders with physical, mental and social outlets through which to build capacity and respond to events beyond their purview. Rural governance could be claimed to be underpinned through the gerontocratic activities of its local community members, and shared in a wider geographic framing through social media and other digital based communities. The close relationship between social resilience and ecological resilience is exacerbated within rural locations; with gerontocratic knowledges and actions the bedrock of future rural governance strategies.

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