What Is the Relationship between Remote Rural Island Place and Perspectives on Ageing of Mid-life Women?[1]

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ABSTRACT   This article makes an original contribution to social gerontology and nissology by addressing a knowledge gap on contemporary gendered ageing in remote, rural island places. Drawing on empirical data gathered through in-depth interviews with 12 mid-life (48–69 years old) women living in the Uist islands of the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, the relationship between ageing and remote rural island place is examined. Reflecting the participant narrative, this study discusses personal and place identities, while exploring place attachment and its relationship with gendered island ageing. This qualitative work adopts a lifecourse framework in order to acknowledge lived experience and cultural context from childhood to adulthood. Data were gathered and analysed through the prism of constructivist grounded theory, a methodology well placed for exploratory research of topics about which relatively little is known. Rich participant insight and analysis eschew island mono-culturalism, instead extending the discourse around remote rural island ageing as distinct from mainland rural ageing. Empirical data informs substantive theory, and fresh considerations on gendered mid-life ageing and remote island place are offered for academia. Findings from this study indicate diverse relationships between ageing and place amongst mid-life women living in the Outer Hebridean regions of North Uist, South Uist, Benbecula and Berneray. The connection between ageing and island place is experienced through place attachment, and is influenced by a range of geographic, demographic and socio-economic factors: primarily of relevance to this study is that of the natural environment. Perspectives on ageing reflect lived lifecourse experience and vary between those native and non-native to the Outer Hebrides; those who live with a partner or alone; those who have children and those child-free; and between those who enjoy socio-economic stability and those who do not.

KEYWORDS   ageing, islands, mid-life place, rural, women

Introduction

Literature from social gerontology has examined some connecting pathways between ageing and place within urban, rural, and island contexts (Rowles 2017), but not within

the context of the Outer Hebridean islands, and not with a focus on relationships between place attachment and ageing. There appears to be a clear need to unpack in greater depth the nuances around gendered ageing within the context of remote rural island place. This question is the primary focus of this paper: "What is the relationship between remote rural island place and perspectives on ageing of mid-life women?" and is explored amongst residents of the Uist islands of the Outer Hebrides.

Of Scotland's 790 islands, 93 are currently inhabited. The Outer Hebrides, Western Isles, or Na h-Eileanan an Iar in Gaelic, are located about 40 miles off the north-west coast of Scotland and comprise over 100 islands, 15 of which are inhabited. Collectively, the Outer Hebrides are home to around 26,120 persons, half of whom are Gaelic speakers (National Records of Scotland 2022). This population figure reflects a decrease of 5.5 percent over the last decade.

The population of Scotland currently stands at around 5.4 million. National Records of Scotland population estimates for mid-2021 (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 2022) show the 45–64 years age group, largely the mid-life target group of this study, to be the most dominant in the Outer Hebrides, with almost 4,000 females. Scotland's Census 2022 data are not yet fully published, but the most recent Census population figures from 2011 for the Uist islands relating to this study are: North Uist (1,619), Berneray (138), South Uist (1,897), and Benbecula (1,330) (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 2022).

The Outer Hebrides are not the most northerly of Scottish islands, but they are the most westerly and the least densely populated at under nine residents per square kilometre. They may be considered geographically remote from mainland UK, but intra-island connectivity is robust. The Uist islands of this study are inter-linked by causeway and are quite separate to the islands further north and further south. Geographical landscapes vary hugely between Outer Hebridean islands, from the rugged, lunar environments of Harris in the north to the rolling sands and fertile 'machair' (Gaelic for fertile, low-lying grassy plain) of South Uist. This study goes some way in explaining how these geographical features influence perspectives on place attachment and ageing.

In a complex archipelago of islands such as that of the Outer Hebrides, multiple coastlines exist over hundreds of miles, from the most northerly to the most southerly parts of these islands. Small islands may be defined by their community connectedness, but again, in the case of an archipelago, the separateness of each island can forge very distinct identities. Islands have unique characteristics (Dommen 1980), yet even within places that are technically no longer islands, being connected by causeway or bridge (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 2023), a one-island identity may be unresolved (Hay 2006). Each Outer Hebridean island is perceived to have its own identity, with wide-ranging cultural diversity.

The literature review below examines what is already known in the areas of mid-life women, nissology, place attachment and ageing. The findings section discusses participant data on island place attachment and ageing. The conclusions and discussion section draws together the theory and empirical data.

Literature Review

To answer the research question, "What is the relationship between remote rural island place and perspectives on ageing of mid-life women?" it is critical to adopt a lifecourse framework (Elder 1998) that understands human development and ageing as a lifelong process (Crosnoe and Elder 2002) with unexpected turns and unanticipated trajectories. "The life course is not a straight line" (Cooksey 2023), but one in which people recalibrate as a result of obstacles, barriers and opportunities. The mid-life participants of this study have socially constructed their pathways of development, creating personal realities and truths around place. The literature on social gerontology, whilst searching for meaning in the intersections of ageing and its influencers of gender and place, posits that historical perspectives and lifecourse development are fundamental to the ageing experience in later life (Peace 2022): as participants age, their "... changing lives alter developmental trajectories" (Elder 1998: 1).

This study examines women at mid-life, a critical stage of the lifecourse, particularly for women: a mid-point at which women review their lives to date and reflect on future ageing (Degges-White and Myers 2006, Lachman, Teshale and Agrigoroaei 2015). Female mid-life is a relatively overlooked lifecourse stage in the area of social gerontology, yet the literature argues that the middle years for women are a critical time of multiple demands from employment and family issues (Chan, Vickers, and Barnard 2020; Duvvury, Ní Léime, and Watson 2021; Steptoe, Deaton, and Stone 2015). Mid-life is considered to be a period of pause, a crossroads at which women look back, look forward, and re-assess their current quality of life (Bowling 2018). It is often a time when temporality takes on a renewed importance by assessing the value of the years remaining. This leads women to engage in both reminiscence and preminiscence (Covan 2008), and perhaps re-configure priorities over the remaining lifecourse. Mid-life women are known to have hybrid age identities, reflected in a cumulative sense of place relative to others (Barrett 2005b). Thus, the roles that may be inhabited by mid-life women – employee, colleague, mother, wife, partner, daughter, friend, sister, volunteer, advocate – become components of their ageing, and form a mosaic or hybrid of self-identities. These self-concepts both influence and are influenced by a woman's relationship with her lifecourse stage, as well as by the context of place, rural or urban (Bryant and Pini 2011). Consequently, what happens at mid-life can have a long-term impact on the nature of ageing (Barrett 2005a; Lachman et al. 2015).

Nissology, the study of islands, "…is not the mere study of events and phenomena on sites which happen to be islands…"(Baldacchino 2004b: 278), but is rather a concept that comprises and is applicable to the very fabric of that which it studies. As a concept, "place", both island and mainland rural, has been studied extensively within the fields of human geography and social and environmental gerontology. Rural place and ageing in particular has been examined through diverse socio-economic prisms (Scharf, Walsh, and O'Shea 2016), but gendered rural island ageing is less studied; perhaps because it is assumed to be little different to the lived narrative of the rural mainland. It is worth noting at this point that "remote" and "rural" are not interchangeable terms. Remote populations are considered smaller, more isolated, and more highly dispersed. Political power is considered to be lower in remote areas, and socio-economic disadvantage higher

(Wakerman et al. 2017). What, after all, is rural about rural ageing (Rowles 1988)? The broad category "rural" is obfuscatory, whether the aim is description or theoretical evaluation, since intra-rural differences can be enormous and rural-urban similarities can be sharp (Shirley 2020). Rural place, whether mainland or island, may share certain positive and negative socio-economic markers, such as heightened community norms, structures and practices, tempered perhaps with an added risk of social exclusion (Walsh, O'Shea, and Scharf 2020), or social isolation and loneliness (Smith and Victor 2018). However, critical differences do exist between mainland and island rural. Contextually, islands are unique in having distinct boundaries delineated by coastline, a feature that may impose an additional degree of geographic, economic, and social separation (Royle 1989). Nissology asks us to re-consider our assumptions of "islandness" (Grydehøj 2017). But what is "islandness"? Islands are largely conceptualised as discrete spaces where the boundaries of national cultures are clearly identified and may be defended (Dodds and Royle 2003). Mainland boundaries and corresponding populations may change over time; island coastlines, although they may erode, clearly delineate who is a member of the island community.

Nissology suggests that island-dwellers, by their geographical isolation and specific socio-economic universe, are likely to inhabit different identities, formed by "island" lived experiences (Burholt, Scharf, and Walsh 2013), and are thus worthy of distinct examination. Concepts such as shared hardships, enforced self-sufficiency, a cultural sense of belonging, frequent social interaction, safe communities and traditional values may characterise much of rural place, but it is only within a remote island's defined boundaries that these concepts are most readily put to the test. It would, however, be wrong to conflate island insularity with community or to assume a homogenous island identity, as witnessed by some of the world's divided islands (Baldacchino 2004b). Some island studies show clear differences in social perspectives, including place identity between those native to an island and those in-migrant (McKinlay and McVittie 2007). It is not uncommon for in-migrants not to be considered fully "local" within their communities, irrespective of length of residence, a factor which may negatively impact place attachment, sense of belonging, and the ageing experience. It has been argued that no island is actually an island (Baldacchino 2004a); through globalisation and technology the world has become both small and highly-connected. However, living on an island may not conflate with "belonging" there.

Hay (2006) posits that it is the shared meaning of restricted space that renders islands a more pronounced place in which to age, producing an environment in which socio-economic features may become more uncertain and precarious (Bates et al. 2019). Island dwellers are distanced from the mainland and a range of key ageing-related facilities and services, which may amplify their precarity. Islanders are likely to be exposed to higher costs of living, to the detriment of those living on low and fixed incomes, such as retirees, those living alone, and older people who may have a greater need for health-related services. This further underscores the need to gain a better understanding of the diverse intersections between "islandness" and ageing.

Of relevance to this study, it is particularly important to better understand island phenomenology (Hay 2006), as the ageing of women on Scottish islands (Scottish Government 2022a) may well be amplified by their very remoteness. The extent of older island women's

attachment to place is related to their sense of cultural or symbolic "belonging". It is to this we now turn.

Place as a concept relates to the micro, as in house and garden; meso, as in the local community; and macro, as in an entire island or country. At its simplest, place is space with meaning (Mahon 2007; Woods 2011), rendering it interpretive in nature; once meaning is attributed to space, place adopts an identity (Rowles 2017). If place is space (Tuan 1979) with meaning, then the concepts of "home" and "belonging" become increasingly critical in connecting place with attachment and its influence on the ageing experience (Andrews et al. 2013). What makes place into "home" relates to the concept of "belonging" (Rowles 2017), be that to the homestead or wider community. One may for example be strongly attached to a house full of personal memories and artefacts (Hannan et al. 2019), but unattached to a neighbourhood full of strangers that is perceived as no longer relevant. Conversely, one's house may become unsustainable in older age, but strong attachment to the natural environment may lead to age-friendly home modifications in order to remain in situ (Han and Kim 2017). The meaning of home and place has become one of the key issues in understanding ageing (Chapman and Peace 2008). If, as in the Outer Hebrides, mid-life women are ageing in a mainly car-dependent society, they understand the critical nature of being able to drive. Consequently, eyesight testing across the lifecourse becomes increasingly meaningful, a measure that is not always readily available in a remote island location. Involuntary retirement from driving through poor vision is a significant life event for many, and can lead to negative psycho-social consequences, including depression (Veerhuis, Traynor, and Randle 2022), and a rupturing of attachment to place.

The concept of place attachment is complex, but fundamentally based upon several aspects of "people-place" bonding (Hernandez et al. 2007; Devine-Wright 2020). The research question of this study, "What is the relationship between remote rural island place and perspectives on ageing of mid-life women?" seeks a deeper understanding of the diverse pathways between place attachment and ageing, with a particular focus on how these pathways are constructed (Junot, Paquet and Fenouillet 2018). Attachment embraces social, environmental and psychological meaning and tends to increase over time (Butcher and Breheny 2016). Whilst the literature on place attachment indicates diversity, there is similarity in the contributory factors. Hennessy speaks of physical, aesthetic, social/cultural, psychological and temporal connectivity (2014), whereas Cross (2015) refers to sensory, narrative, historical, spiritual, ideological, commodifying, and material dependence factors. Attachment takes many forms, from nature bonding with the landscape (Husser, Roberto, and Allen 2019), to physical attachment that relates to amenity-orientation such as local services. Social or cultural attachment brought about by the building of social capital (Hennessy et al. 2014; Lewicka 2011) manifests as community activities and social networks (Herbert 2018) with neighbourhood, friends, family and significant others.

Place attachment may act as both a negative and positive force in ageing. An attachment to a house or community built up over the lifecourse may compel an older woman to age in a place that may not always support her well-being, forming a "maladaptive" attachment (Rowles 2017: 207). Conversely, attachment may positively enhance her ageing experience through a renewed appreciation of the natural environment in later life. To illustrate,

if home maintenance is a struggle, as cited by some participants in the findings section below, worry, stress and negative mental and physical health effects may follow. Such physical and emotional experiences of hopelessness and isolation influence a person's identity and attachment with place, with likely negative consequences for ageing (Coleman, Kearns, and Wiles 2016). The change in demographic from wife to widow, for instance, may be sufficient to trigger adaptive behaviour in order to continue to age in place. However, there may come, as the findings from this study suggest, "… an environmental tipping point or option recognition" (Peace, Holland, and Kellaher 2011: 735) in which the lived experience becomes out of balance, eliciting a range of strategic responses that include re-location away from the desired place in which to age.

The findings from this study concur with the existing literature highlighting the critical nature of maintaining a meaningful environment in which to "age in place" (Coleman et al. 2016), a concept accepted as universally desirable. However, the tools needed to enable island women to age in their own homes and communities are not always readily available. A number of studies have found that whilst financial resources are vital in providing agency to self-govern and "age in place" (Wiles et al. 2011), so too is the quality of social networks (Gilleard, Hyde, and Higgs 2007) with significant "others", including family, friends, neighbours and tradespeople. These are the factors that make one feel one is ageing in the "right place".

The sense of "being in place", of being "symbolically connected", is the essence of well-being in later life (Rowles 2017; Scannell and Gifford 2017), but this sense of attachment is fluid over the lifecourse and may be experienced differently at mid-life than in older age, depending upon social memory practices and processes (Degnen 2016). Of particular importance to older rural island women, who often find themselves living alone in later life, is amenity/environment-oriented physical attachment to place (Burholt et al. 2014) in which the environment, whether positive or negative, becomes increasingly important to self-image. For example, will a sense of "being in place" at mid-life compensate for sub-standard housing that becomes untenable in older age when living remotely and alone? Or if one is ageing child-free and alone (Ruegemer and Dziengel 2021) with few supports? Similarly, will an under-funded healthcare service, of marginal importance at mid-life, become a "make or break" issue in later life (Thurston and Meadows 2003) in determining whether to stay or leave an island? Considering and understanding the role that place plays enables the development of policies and programmes that support older rural women's quality of life, rather than force their departure from the places with which they know themselves (Chapman and Peace 2008). Such issues as these are explored further in the findings section below. This is preceded initially by a section on methodology and methods, which details how the aim of this study was addressed.

Methodology and Methods

This exploratory, qualitative study is informed by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), which analyses and interprets through a particular theoretical perspective, that of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz 2008). This perspective assumes that people construct selves, society and reality through interaction, focusing on the dynamic relationships

between meaning and actions. Mid-life women are not an homogenous group, so it is apt to employ symbolic interactionism (Charmaz 2008) to help address the processes through which members of this group create, mediate and assign individual meaning to the world around them. It could be anticipated, for example, that meaning assigned to island life and ageing may differ between the indigenous and the in-migrant (Hernandez et al. 2007) or by length of residence or by precise island location. In order to understand perspectives on ageing and remote rural island place, this study is underpinned by a lifecourse framework (Elder 1998), which allows for the consideration of lifelong contextual influences "from cradle to grave" on ageing as a culturally dependent social construct. Lived experiences over the historical lifecourse reflect perspectives on ageing.

The extended mid-life age range examined in this study (48–69 years) forms the largest population sector in the Outer Hebrides, at just over 30 percent; the population gender breakdown is roughly 50:50. By the year 2028 it is projected that the population of the Western Isles will have decreased over a ten-year period by more than six percent, but the average age will continue to increase (National Records of Scotland 2022). Thus, whilst the mid-life age group is currently the largest on the islands, as this group continues to age, the densest population group will become the over-75s.

Participants were interviewed in-person during the autumn of 2021, a period of the global Covid-19 pandemic during which travel restrictions to the UK had eased, allowing for international research to resume. Purposive recruitment of 12 participants was achieved by utilising stakeholders such as non-government organisations, local community groups, snowball sampling, and utilising local print and broadcast media to raise awareness. None of the participants was known to the researcher. This qualitative research sought no quantitative income or class classifications from participants. An effort was made to secure a diversity of participant in order to reflect wide-ranging views. Thus, participants were selected from a cross-section of the Uist Hebridean islands, from different points in the mid-life age range, and from different socio-economic demographics. This allowed for the exploration of inter- and intra-island/indigenous/in-migrant perspectives on ageing and place. Three participants were selected from Benbecula, five from South Uist, three from North Uist, and one from Berneray. All these "islands" are connected by causeway, allowing for easy access to interviewees. It was not possible in this study to select interviewees from unconnected islands, such as Lewis, Harris, and Barra.

One-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews of 90 minutes to two hours took place in the homes of the 12 participants. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed by the researcher. To ensure anonymity, the names of participants have been changed and precise locations and personal details such as work roles have been generalised. In line with constructivist grounded theory, the interview questions were kept as "loose" as possible. Some themes were raised by the interviewer, including "ageing on an island", "forms of attachment to island place", and "lived experience in remote island place". Participants were allowed to diverge from these concepts to bring in others such as "employment", "health", "social relationships", "connectivity", and "geography and history of the Hebridean islands". Discourse on these ancillary themes helped to inform the research question: "What is the relationship between remote rural island place and perspectives on ageing of mid-life women?"

Table 1: Demographic table of participants

Participant Name	Age Residence	Place of Years	Length In-migrant	Native Status	Marital Level	Children	Education	Employed/Retired
Marjory	60–65	Berneray	20–30	In-migrant	Married	Yes	3rd	Employed
Kathleen	55–60	South Uist	20–30	In-migrant	Married	Yes	4th	Employed
Pauline	45–50	South Uist	<10	In-migrant	Partner	No	4th	Employed
Kimberley	55–60	South Uist	10–20	In-migrant	Widowed	No	4th level	Employed
Georgia	60–65	North Uist	>30	Native	Widowed	Yes	3rd	Retired
Cassie	60–65	Benbecula	20–30	In-migrant	Married	Yes	2nd	Retired
Lynne	55–60	Benbecula	>30	Native	Married	No	2nd	Employed
Morag	65–70	South Uist	20–30	Native	Divorced	Yes	3rd	Employed
Maebh	50–55	South Uist	<10	In-migrant	Married	No	4th	Unemployed
Janice	60–65	North Uist	>30	Native	Married	Yes	4th	Retired
Alice	50–55	North Uist	<10	In-migrant	Single	No	3rd	Employed
Anita	55–60	Benbecula	>30	In-migrant	Widowed	Yes	3rd	Student

Of the 12 participants, two completed solely second level education (secondary school), five completed third level education (undergraduate level), and five completed or were currently engaging with fourth level education (post-graduate level). One participant was divorced, three were widowed, one was single, and seven were either married or living with a partner. Five participants had no children; all children of the remaining seven participants were in adulthood and no longer lived at home. Four participants were indigenous to the Outer Hebrides; the remaining eight in-migrants had chosen to live there from other areas of Scotland, England, and Europe. The length of time living in the Outer Hebrides by in-migrants ranged from two years to 34 years, the average length being around 20 years. Four of these in-migrants were living in the Outer Hebrides for over 25 years, and in some regards considered themselves to be "native". All participants were white as it did not prove possible to secure those of a different ethnicity.

Data gathering and analysis remained close to raw data and used open and focused coding and categorising in an iterative fashion. Open codes, using gerunds, were the first step employed to describe participants' narratives. This was followed by more concept-focused coding and theoretical coding, which allowed for the development of categories and the emergence of possible substantive theory. This reflexive and flexible approach to analysis allowed for the constant comparison of data, codes, concepts, patterns, and gaps, both within and between transcripts, until it became clear that the properties around the concept of remote rural island place and ageing had become saturated. The iterative process involved reflection on interview transcripts as well as on memos and field notes. Memos detailed the meaning and use of codes, concepts and categories as well as aiding the comprehension of data and "defining moments". Furthermore, memos helped in creating focused codes and theoretical categories, ultimately explaining any substantive theory reached. Memos were used over the entire time period of analysis to help untangle complex or contradictory data gathered within interviews, for example a longing to stay on the islands sitting alongside a need to leave. The writing of memos

helped to identify gaps in analysis that needed addressing and allowed for personal reflection on the efficacy of the interview context, setting, place, and non-verbal communication. Memos helped to highlight which questions worked well and which did not, noting topics raised, avoided or missed by participants.

Transcript data were analysed and compared to allow possible conceptual and theoretical categories to emerge. Both content and context were examined to establish what was sensed through keen observation and interaction.

Ethical approval was granted in 2020 by the National University of Ireland, Galway (now the University of Galway) Ethics Committee.

Findings

This study aims to understand the multiple ways in which mid-life women socially construct and embody remote rural island place as they age. This section on findings examines and discusses participant discourse on island place, pathways to place attachment, and the critical relationship between the natural environment and ageing.

The literature tells us that place attachment manifests at micro, meso and macro levels, from the immediate home and garden to the neighbourhood, community, and country. Place attachment may result from small things, such as a bohereen (lane) walked each day to the shoreline, or a window view of a cairn (pre-historic burial mound of stones). One indigenous participant from North Uist, Georgia, whilst living on the mainland for some years greatly missed "the blue sky, the sea, the grass and white sheets blowing in the wind". Such forms of attachment may be prosaic, but gather strength from attributed meaning and the creation of socially constructed place (Hennessy et al. 2014).

Whilst participants' demographic, employment, state of health, quality of housing, and nature of social relationships all contributed towards place attachment, by far the strongest form of attachment for both indigenous and in-migrant participants (Yoshida, Matsuda, Fukushi et al. 2022) was through the natural environment, as illustrated below:

> My connection with this place goes back a long way. I fell in love with the island; it feels like a spiritual home and where I need to be. This place makes me feel whole, I am part of the land and it is part of me. The land is my friend, this place looks after me and I look after it by planting trees and cutting meadows.
>
> I am really familiar with the landscape and history of this place, and I like being somewhere you can look out and not see any impact from other human beings. I see fencing and sheep and the rest is wild and natural. South Uist has the machair, but here in North Uist – it's hard to say what it is, but there is something about here – the burial cairns and stone circles – it's magnetic. We're surrounded by salt pans with sea pink in the spring and we get wading birds, deer and rabbits who all just walk into the garden. [Alice, in-migrant, North Uist]

Like most participants in this study, Alice's attachment to place was primarily due to the flora and fauna of her natural environment (Wright and Lund 2000) and its restorative therapy (Kaplan 1995). Nature's contribution to human well-being and place attachment is relatively well documented (Yoshida et al. 2022). Specifically, the positive influence of nature

on bio-psycho-social outcomes, from reduced blood pressure and enhanced attention to improved social interactions, underpins a number of studies (Russell, Guerry, Balvanera et al. 2013). This concurs with feelings of environmental well-being expressed by almost all participants.

Whilst almost all participants cited the natural environment as providing a deep attachment to place, this attachment was sometimes temporal, as illustrated below by a participant who had lived in the Outer Hebrides for just two years. Pauline was still in transition in her South Uist home, still adjusting to a different landscape and lifestyle to that of her home country. Her immediate attachment to place was through her local partner, but also through what she perceived as a close-knit community, and in particular through her love of the natural environment:

> I need to let this environment seep into me, and that takes time. At the moment, my ties here are mainly with my partner, who is local, but also with nature, which is a huge part of my life, it's like a drug, I need to be close to it every day. Even after two years I feel it in my stomach. Like an owl crossed my path recently, and last week the hills were covered in cloud, just like Table Top Mountain in South Africa. It goes straight to your heart. But I also like the strong community bonding, where folk help out with moving the sheep. [Pauline, in-migrant, South Uist]

However, another participant, Maebh, who had also moved to South Uist from an EU country to be with her partner, a local, whilst reporting a huge spiritual love of the land itself, had not led to place attachment over the six years of her stay. Maebh had a number of health issues that could not be addressed living in South Uist. Consequently, she alluded to a reluctance to grow old in the Outer Hebrides, and a willingness to re-locate when she felt the time was right:

> …it felt like my ancestors were close to me here, even though they are not. I feel this huge connection to the land … this is where I am meant to be for now, but here is not home. This place is just a stage in my journey, not my destination. [Maebh, in-migrant, South Uist]

Temporality was also an issue for one indigenous participant who had worked away on the mainland for 40 years. Whist she considered herself fully indigenous, some others in the community, she reported, did not. It would appear that "local" and "in-comer" are forms of negotiated identity (Gibbons 2010, McKinlay and McVittie 2007), and that an unbroken period of residence may be required in order to be considered fully "local" by some. Place attachment for Morag was entirely through the natural environment:

> It is not the people who keep me here … it is the spirit of the land. The place has a spirit and it feeds my spirit. I love the land and water, the night sky, the birds and animals. The light changes every day. It feeds my soul and kept me sane all the time I worked away. I always knew I would come back here. The land is more important to me than people. People are not my buddies. [Morag, indigenous, South Uist]

A sense of belonging to the community and contribution to the land features at the heart of attachment to the environment. Some residents like Marjory benefited from both personal and community gardening, which helped to foster neighbourhood citizenship (Milligan et al. 2004):

> I live in a wonderful location, right on the beach, and I appreciate it more and more with each year. I'm not from here, but I feel at home here. I feel dead lucky to have ended up in Berneray. I love being outside and my big thing is growing indigenous trees – rowan, birch, willow, alders and hazel. And I collect cockles and mussels from the shore to eat. [Marjory, in-migrant, Berneray]

Reflecting findings in the literature, some participants were strongly attached to their houses and gardens (Bhatti and Church 2004), due to high personal investment: "We have all the memories here in this house – of the children playing – everyday stuff that makes it hard to leave" [Kathleen, in-migrant, South Uist]. However, Kathleen's identity and degree of place attachment were very much embedded in her professional work, which she believed to have been thwarted by her remote island location, which prevented her from networking with colleagues: "The Hebrides' ageing population nourishes volunteerism, not careerism". Kathleen regretted that for her career to progress she would need to leave the islands. Staying on the islands and "giving up on my dreams and advancing my career in any meaningful way" has, Kathleen reported, made her feel less attached to the place and older than her years.

Whilst strong attachment to place may be perceived as a positive position, it nonetheless has the potential to be problematic in later life. Three of the 12 participants were widows: two in-migrants and one indigenous. The indigenous widow, Georgia, reported being financially comfortable, experienced no loneliness, lived in a comfortable home and was unwavering in her strong attachment to a place that reflected her lifelong island biography. In contrast, the two in-migrant widows felt that their personal identity was different as a widow and as both husbands had built their homes, both participants now struggled somewhat to maintain a place attachment and felt compelled to forge new meanings with place other than "mortgage, marriage and memories" (Gilroy 2008: 152). Despite a strong attachment to the natural environment of the Uists, both voiced concerns over the quality of their ageing in later life due to housing difficulties:

> I'm still grieving to be honest, even though it's eight years now. My late husband built this house, like there are memories in these bricks and mortar. Everything is imbued with emotion here, so I just can't sell up and let it go. I don't know how I would get my head around leaving this house, but I can't do the repairs and I can't afford to get anyone in. I really need to work out what is my relationship with this house. [Anita, in-migrant, Benbecula]

Whilst widowed Anita currently reported reduced levels of place attachment, Kimberley, also a widow, though financially challenged, felt more attached to her place through her work, the landscape around her and her pet dog, underlining the subjective nature of place attachment. Companion animals have long been recognised as positively influencing ageing in place (Toohey 2023), but may prove insufficient in dealing with housing obstacles:

> My dog has got me through the worst of it. I don't know how I would have coped without her. She gets me out of the house every day for exercise running. We sit on the machair and watch butterflies and rabbits. This is a living landscape, so rich in wild flowers and birds – like the oyster-catchers and the herons and eagles. It's pure therapy. But, winters are hard here, and it's so much harder on your own – like if my roof blows off, how do I deal with that? [Kimberley, in-migrant, South Uist]

Almost all participants believed that their relationship with the natural environment and its tangible and intangible qualities strongly sustained their well-being and ability to age better, important factors in supporting autonomy in later life: "The interplay between the self and the environment underpins or undermines independence" (Gilroy 2008: 145). For a number of participants, their particular place on the islands acted positively as a "therapeutic landscape: places of perceived healing, health", well-being and ageing (Bell et al. 2018, Finlay et al. 2015; Gesler 1992; Gesler 2005). Some participants even attested to the land's ability to actually slow down the ageing process:

> I think this place is keeping me younger, it protects and nurtures me. And in old age I have a fantastic hospital I can walk into, and we have an air ambulance taking us to the mainland. I don't think we're disadvantaged at all living on an island. [Alice, in-migrant, North Uist]

Concurring with "blue zone" literature and the therapeutic effects of sea-immersion on well-being (Britton and Foley 2021; Wang and Sani 2024), the clean air and pristine seawater were reported as helping Anita's physical and mental ageing, as she tried to re-negotiate her new identity as a non-native widow. Anita was now using the power of the "blue zone" to help ease the malaise she felt of a "social disconnect" (Britton and Foley 2021; Wheaton et al. 2020):

> I just decided on a whim I'm going in. The sea was freezing, but brilliant. I need to start doing things that this landscape is offering me. I think I've been traumatised for the last while, and in the sea was the first time since he (husband) died that I felt alive and part of something again. I have to find myself again. [Anita, widowed in-migrant, Benbecula]

Referencing the benefits attached to the natural environment, attention restoration theory (Joye and Dewitte 2018) mirrors the positive sense of well-being and cognitive functioning cited by a number of participants who were relying on their place and on nature to enhance their ageing process.

The Western Isles are known as the "long isle". Although there are small conurbations of people living in the capital, Stornoway, Benbecula and other hubs, homes for many are more scattered than clustered. The repercussions of dispersed housing impacts levels of public transport, as well as social and medical amenities. Some participants like Cassie believed that ageing well in later life was more difficult in the Outer Hebrides due to limited medical resources, harsh winters, the unsuitable housing stock of poorly insulated homes, and unreliable public transport.

> There is only one optician around here, dentists only do emergency work, the GPs are all "Zoom", and the NHS subsidies for private services like massage or chiropody are all gone, and it's too dear for private therapists to travel here for the business they get. [Cassie, in-migrant, Benbecula]

As is common amongst older people living in rural areas, there was widespread dread of the detrimental impact of losing the ability to drive, and an increased reliance on taxis. The literature documents the confluence of discretionary, or "non-essential", driving and well-being for older people, and also the psycho-social consequences of withdrawal, including depression that may result (Hagan 2020, Veerhuis et al. 2022). Participant Anita concurs:

> Living up here, everyone is spread out. If your eyesight is gone or you break a wrist, that would age you mentally when you couldn't drive. In a city you can walk to the shops or café, but up here, without the social contacts and transport I think you'd age faster, you'd be housebound. [Anita, in-migrant, Benbecula]

Whilst some forms of community transport do exist, this did little to assure mid-life participants about retaining autonomy in later life. In addition, community transport is often manned by volunteers over 70 years of age: "the old looking after the old" [Morag, indigenous, South Uist]. Harsh winter weather and transport difficulties may ultimately demand an increased self-sufficiency from people. Notably, a number of participants were already growing produce in their own gardens or as part of community projects. Inter-dependency may be a natural way of life for native Hebrideans, but for those without family connections, the social separation brought about by months of inclement weather was believed by participants to lead to loneliness, social isolation, and to accelerate the ageing process. For one participant living alone, conditions in which "sometimes you cannot open the car door for the wind" [Morag, South Uist], could be reason enough to consider re-locating in later life. A number of participants believed that the high winter winds experienced in the Outer Hebrides are a concern for the old and the frail, confining people to their homes, sometimes alone, for long periods. Outer Hebridean roads may be relatively empty, but speeding drivers were also cited as a concern for older people, making some reluctant to go for even short walks. Both of these issues increase the risk factor of social isolation and accelerated ageing amongst older people.

The literature informs us that at mid-life, women review their ageing process through the prism of quality of life (Robertson et al. 2020). The recent Covid-19 pandemic led all the participants in this study to imagine what ageing under future lockdown conditions could be like. Social restrictions, some still in place, proved to be particularly problematic for those living alone into older age. One participant, Georgia, reported fewer social outlets, particularly for single women, as a result of the pandemic and an "awkwardness" (Vasara 2020) in attending mixed-gender gatherings alone as a widow, both of which made her feel older than her 63 years. Kimberley reported feeling "invisible" (Biggs 1999; Walkner, Weare, and Tully 2017) at mid-life, particularly with her new identity as a widow, and older than her 57 years.

The limitations of primary health care support, as well as good quality geriatric care in old age, caused some concerns around long-term place attachment, even for the youngest participant in her 40s:

> Medical facilities and the weather worry me about growing old here. The hospitals don't have the capacity, so you're flown off to the mainland if you get sick, but the weather can easily stop helicopters and ferries getting out. [Pauline, in-migrant, South Uist]

Despite this, most participants favoured island over city ageing. Island care homes in particular were praised, although many participants worried about the long-term viability of geriatric care due to on-going governmental public expenditure cuts. At mid-life, participants hoped to age in place (Wiles et al. 2011), perceiving care homes to be the domain of those who had no relatives to mind them. However, ageing in place requires a range of socio-economic supports including health and social connectivity services (Wiles, Kearns, and Bates 2021:

175–187), and this may ultimately result in a two-tier system of those indigenous to the Uist islands who have family, and in-migrants who may not.

With this in mind, some participants, wishing to age in place (Han and Kim 2017), had begun to "future-proof" their homes by building extensions at ground level or by refurbishment to accommodate hired help. One participant, Morag, had already renovated the upstairs of her house to provide for a future carer. Others, like Lynne, were actively reflecting on the implications of old age and of future adjustments:

> I've seen relatives and friends as they got older and their capabilities lessen, so you have to make changes and allow for that. So maybe we wouldn't keep livestock any longer, and maybe we'd just have the electric throughout the house, whereas we have the Raeburn range just now. [Lynne, indigenous, Benbecula]

Future-proofing the home may also necessitate a robust relationship with new technologies. Unlike some rural areas, the Western Isles enjoy relatively good Internet connectivity. All participants were regular Internet users, and being located so remotely, ordering goods and services on-line was considered to be essential. Furthermore, digital technology may augment the ageing process for older women (Bruggencate, Luijkx, and Sturm 2019):

> I think I'll age better here than on the mainland – I have good broadband and can order anything online, and I'm doing an Open University degree online just to stave off cognitive decline. It's free through the Scottish Government and is an investment for them as it will keep me out of the care home. If I didn't have the Internet I think I'd really struggle. [Kimberley, in-migrant, South Uist]

Place attachment and its relationship with ageing is a complex process which may act as a motivator and a means for ageing (Wiles et al. 2021: 175–187). Findings from this study suggest attachment to place through the natural environment in particular as a critical and positive influencer of ageing, both at mid-life and into older age.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article contributes to social gerontology and nissology by addressing a knowledge gap on contemporary gendered ageing in remote, rural island places, in this study, the Uist islands of the Outer Hebrides. Literature, such as that by Hay (2006) and Royle (1989), remind us that the geographic boundedness of islands results in a powerful sense of community dictated by geography. Such boundedness may produce a heightened sense of place identity and personal identity, influencing place attachment across the lifecourse, as was reported by many of the 12 participants in this study.

This study's research question – "What is the relationship between remote rural island place and perspectives on ageing of mid-life women?" – has been addressed primarily through analysis of empirical data on the relationship between the lived experiences on the Uist islands and how these have impacted perspectives on place attachment and ageing. The data reveal a mostly positive relationship between remote rural island living and ageing both amongst the indigenous and in-migrant participants, and whilst a number of factors

impacted positive place attachment, the natural environment was reported as the primary one that was integral to women's identity and as an aid to ageing (Husser et al. 2020). This is very much in line with the literature on therapeutic landscapes endorsing the benefits of utilising nature, particularly green or blue environments (Britton and Foley 2021; Husser et al. 2020; Milligan et al. 2004; Wright and Lund 2000; Yoshida et al. 2022), in promoting well-being. This study, however, extends this understanding of the natural environment beyond well-being and into a deeper connection with perceived ageing.

The focus of this study's place attachment and ageing is entirely within the context of island living. Nissology tells us that islands are unique, and that although sometimes precarious places with financial, housing, social and health-related challenges (Bates et al. 2019) they are generally perceived to be quite different to mainland rural environments in which to age. Most mid-life participants in this study reported a positive relationship with their island place and homes, irrespective of socio-economic challenges, and were more likely to adapt their environments to their ageing needs than to leave. Some participants, particularly widows, felt vulnerable in a post-marital state in which they no longer were tied to a "gender contract" (Manor 2023), and were subject to increased socio-economic challenges, leaving some feeling older than their biological years and fearing for their future island ageing. Other participants felt resilient by dint of personal biography, heritage and familial connectivity, but this "cushioning" was not readily available to others who had no or fewer family ties to the islands, or who lived in dispersed geographical areas with no neighbours. Thus, those unpartnered or non-native women may be at a higher risk of social isolation, loneliness, and social exclusion (Walsh et al. 2020) in later life unless these issues are addressed through socio-economic supports. Pathways to such supports for social isolation and loneliness are outlined in a recent report on connectivity and loneliness (Scottish Government 2018).

A feature of islands worldwide, including the Outer Hebrides, is that of de-population and ageing in which the young leave to seek work, and in-migrants, often retired, move in (Hay 2006). To this end, the Scottish Government has produced a "Plan of 13 Strategic Objectives" for the benefit of island communities at risk (Scottish Government 2022b). There is also a crucial need, as reported by some participants, for better career advancement opportunities for all age groups.

The threat of de-population and outward migration continues, particularly amongst those in the working-population age group. Nourishing a balanced inter-generational population on the Outer Hebridean islands is critical to maintaining and enhancing pathways to place attachment and the lived experience in older age. Reports of in-migration from the young Outer Hebridean diaspora, who are creating new forms of employment, are encouraging (Uist Beo 2023).

It should be noted, though, that an ageing population features positive aspects that are not always included in the literature. Hennessy (2014) speaks of the social capital of mid-life women who, despite challenges, may contribute positively to society through both voluntary and paid activities. Thus, older women may be viewed as part of any demographic solution, not problem, in stemming island de-population. Socio-economic supports take many forms, and a number of participants expressed the need for a secure supply of healthcare services for an ageing population. However, non-medical supports may be equally influential on

place attachment and ageing. Most participants spoke of the need for micro-based initiatives to address services absent from the islands, including domestic repairs and maintenance in order to prevent having to move out of their island homes. The ageing population of the Outer Hebridean islands may itself be able to provide such business initiatives, creating employment opportunities and changing the outlook of older people from one of beneficiary to that of client (Royle 1989). Older people can be a positive driving force for local economies by playing a central role in rural and island life (Murakami, Gilroy, and Atterton 2009), providing the additional benefit of helping to enhance place attachment and a positive ageing experience.

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