

Social Participation in the Context of Rurality: How Does It Contribute to Health and Well-being?



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Context

Canadian rural communities are marked by the presence of social health inequalities. These inequalities are aggravated by recent transformations associated with the phenomenon of devitalization (loss of services, rural exodus, etc.). In this context, participation has been recognized by many as an important lever for community development (Leroux & al., 2002) and a means of achieving health equity (Lachapelle & Bourque, 2008). However, few studies have documented rural participation, and even fewer have examined its impacts, particularly on the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

Key Points of the Literature Review

Social participation

- Few studies address the influence of social participation on health and well-being in the rural North American context.
- Rural residents are more likely to do unpaid work and are more likely to have a strong sense of belonging in their local community (Turcotte, 2005).
- Residents of rural areas are more engaged “because of where they are, not who they are” (Putnam, 2000: 206, in Turcotte, 2005), underscoring the importance of the rural context.

Health and well-being

- Rural health has been widely studied in terms of access to health service, but other determinants have been much less studied.
- Many quantitative research on social capital and social integration have documented positive associations with health (Berkman & al. 2014).
- However, these studies have a limited contribution to understanding how social participation influences health (Rifkin, 2014).
- Most studies emphasize compositional effects (e.g. personal characteristics) on health; contextual effects of rurality (e.g. culture) on health are neglected.

Research Question and Objectives

- How does social participation contribute to health and well-being in the rural context?

More specifically, this research aims to:

1. Describe the social participation (its nature and context) of people living in the community being studied.
2. Explore how participation contributes, or does not contribute, to the health and well-being of individuals and communities.
3. Explore the influence of the rural context in the dynamic between participation and health.

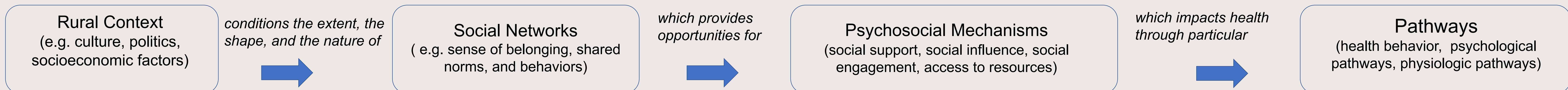
Methodology

A narrative research has been undertaken to collect stories that illustrate how social participation influences health and well-being in a rural community. Life story interviews were undertaken (ongoing at the time of printing) with a dozen individuals involved in their community. This method allows participants to share a part of their lived experience in the narrative form. Since the stories are narrated in a meaningful way for the participant, the researcher is better able to understand the depth of the narrator's experience and the influence of the rural context. A rural community located in the Centre-du-Québec region was selected, mainly because of the importance of social participation in this milieu. Participants were selected who had given their time to their community in a significant way, outside the domestic sphere.



Conceptual Framework (adapted from Berkman & al., 2000)

The following schema, adapted from Berkman's work, presents a conceptualization of the influence of participation on health in the rural context. In this research, social participation is conceptualized as “the action of contributing to the community by giving time to organizations and individuals outside the domestic sphere” (Gaudet, 2012: 2).



Data Analysis

The analysis will explore how social participation contributes to health and well-being in the rural context from the participants' point of view. The explanatory mechanisms will be grouped into themes, which makes it possible to see how the different narratives intersect, contradict, and complement one another. The narrative will also be reconstituted in chronological order to identify the causal relationship within (Bertaux, 2016). In the narratives collected, the analysis focuses on three levels of influence: the individual, the social networks, and the socio-structural context. These levels are found in the conceptual framework, which will be used to facilitate connections with the existing scientific literature.

Results

Analysis ongoing

Conclusion

- The literature review suggests that participation is essential for the empowerment of communities, but more research is required to understand how it influences rural health.
- These findings have implications for the development of public policies, underlining the importance of policies that support grass-roots initiatives and the empowerment of communities.
- The rural context shapes the nature of social participation and its outcomes on health and well-being.
- Narrative interviews enable participants and researchers to explore the influence the rural context on participation, health, and well-being.

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