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Iłona MATYSIAK*

Informal help and support practices for older adults and their families in rural areas

Nieformalne praktyki pomocy i wsparcia dla osób starszych oraz ich rodzin w środowiskach wiejskich

Abstract

Introduction. Rural populations in Poland, and the United States, are ageing. Longevity, as well as the individualization, feminization, and singularization of old age, are characteristic of this process. This raises challenges in terms of support and care that enable a good quality of life and ageing in place.

Aim. The aim of this article is to identify informal, and extra-familial care and support, practices for older adults living in rural communities in Poland and the United States, as well as factors that may strengthen or weaken them.

Methods and materials. The empirical part of the article is based on qualitative data from the author’s own research conducted in 2023 in three rural communes in Poland, as well as a study of four small rural towns in Iowa from 2022.

* e-mail: imatysiak@aps.edu.pl

Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland

Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej im. Marii Grzegorzewskiej, Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii, Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Polska

ORCID: 0000-0001-9561-6614

The data is drawn from in-depth interviews with residents aged 65 and over, and local stakeholders.

Results. Informal and extra-family care and support practices identified include neighbourly “watchfulness” and help, mutual support within networks created by older adults, as well as help from local institution representatives that goes beyond their formal duties. These practices most often concern IADL (Instrumental Activities of Daily Living), e.g., shopping, transportation, and emotional support. They are facilitated by strong neighbourhood ties, as well as relationships created through engagement in local organizations or religious groups or churches. Such help and support very rarely include assistance with ADL (Activities of Daily Living), e.g., personal hygiene, or financial assistance. People who exhibit deviant behaviours may be excluded from access to informal care and support practices within the community. The dominant role in informal care is played by the family, but extra-family support can be its substitute to some extent, and certainly an important complement.

Keywords: ageing, rural areas, local communities, informal care, informal support.

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Populacja wiejska w Polsce i w Stanach Zjednoczonych starzeje się. Cechy charakterystyczne tego procesu to długowieczność, a także indywidualizacja, feminizacja i singularyzacja. Rodzi to wyzwania dotyczące wsparcia i opieki, które umożliwiałyby dobrą jakość życia i starzenie się w miejscu zamieszkania.

Cel. Celem artykułu jest rozpoznanie nieformalnych i pozarodzinnych praktyk opieki i wsparcia dla ludzi starszych, które występują w społecznościach wiejskich w Polsce i w Stanach Zjednoczonych, a także jakie czynniki mogą je wzmacniać lub osłabiać.

Metody i materiały. Empiryczna część artykułu opiera się na danych jakościowych pochodzących z badań własnych, przeprowadzonych w 2023 roku w trzech gminach wiejskich w Polsce oraz w 2022 roku w czterech małych wiejskich miasteczkach w stanie Iowa. Dane pochodzą z wywiadów pogłębionych z mieszkańcami w wieku 65 lat i więcej oraz z lokalnymi informatorami.

Wyniki. Zidentyfikowane nieformalne i pozarodzinne praktyki opieki i wsparcia obejmują sąsiedzką czujność i pomoc, wzajemne wsparcie w ramach sieci tworzonych przez osoby starsze, a także pomoc przedstawicieli lokalnych instytucji wykraczającą poza ich formalne obowiązki. Praktyki te najczęściej dotyczą IADL (*Instrumental Activities of Daily Living*), np. zakupów, transportu oraz wsparcia emocjonalnego. Sprzyjają im silne więzi sąsiedzkie, a także relacje tworzące się w ramach wspólnego zaangażowania w lokalne organizacje lub wspólnoty religijne. Bardzo rzadko obejmują pomoc w ADL (*Activities of Daily Living*), np. w utrzymaniu higieny osobistej lub pomoc finansową. Osoby wykazujące zachowania dewiacyjne mogą być wykluczane

z dostępu do takich praktyk pomocy i wsparcia. Dominującą rolę w opiece nieformalnej pełni rodzina, ale wsparcie pozarodzinne może być do pewnego stopnia jej substytutem, a na pewno ważnym uzupełnieniem.

Słowa kluczowe: starzenie się, obszary wiejskie, społeczności lokalne, opieka nieformalna, wsparcie nieformalne.

Introduction

Both in Poland and the United States, as well as in other countries of the global North, we are observing the demographic ageing of societies. This process is usually more advanced in rural areas compared to cities. For example, in the United States in 2021, the percentage of people aged 65 and over exceeded 20% in the rural population, while among urban residents it was 16% (Davis, Rupasingha, Cromartie, & Sanders, 2022). It is predicted that in 2050 the proportion of people aged 65 and over in the total US population will reach 22% (Vespa, Medina, & Armstrong, 2020), and the differences between rural and urban areas will widen. In the case of Polish society, the ageing process is more intense. According to data and forecasts by the Central Statistical Office (GUS), in 2020 the share of the population aged 65 and over was 18.9% of the total population, 20.8% in cities and 16.1% in rural areas. In 2050, these shares will reach 32.7% (total), 34.7% (cities) and 30.2% (rural areas) respectively (Błędowski et al., 2021). Although the rural population in Poland remains relatively younger compared to the urban population, it has been characterised by an intensive process of so-called “double ageing” over the past two decades (Stanny, Komorowski, 2024). The proportion of people aged 80 and over in the total population will increase from 4.4% in 2020 to 10.4% in 2050, in cities from 4.7% to 11.4%, and rural areas from 4.0% to 9.2% (Błędowski et al., 2021). Of course, Poland and the United States differ significantly in terms of their public services and social support systems or the prevailing “care regime.” However, they face similar challenges in the face of an ageing rural population. These relate to the need for support and assistance for older people to enable them to remain in their place of residence for as long as possible (*ageing in place*).

This paper aims to identify informal care practices for older people living in rural areas. These practices are part of informal care in the broadest sense, provided free of charge by immediate family members, acquaintances, friends or neighbours (Wiles, 2005). Magdalena Rosochacka-Gmitrzak

and Joanna Raław (2015) define it as a dynamic process of both instrumental (sets of activities, spaces and interpersonal relationships) and emotional nature. It is usually distinguished from formal assistance provided by professionals and institutions for a fee. The vast majority of existing studies are devoted to formal or family care.

The focus is on informal practices of help and support outside the immediate family. We will look at the importance of neighbourly help and neighbourly vigilance within the local community, as well as the support provided by representatives of local institutions in situations that go beyond the scope of their formal duties. The role of support provided by older people to other older residents within a mutual aid network will also be emphasised. Such initiatives and practices are not unique to rural environments, but they are particularly important there due to the often limited access of residents to public services and institutionalised forms of assistance. They are also worth looking at in the context of the shrinking family care resources and the progressive singularisation of old age, observed not only in cities but also in rural areas. The considerations presented in the text will be illustrated with empirical material from qualitative research conducted in Poland and Iowa (USA) over the past few years.

Ageing rural population in Poland and the United States

According to the 2021 National Census, the rural population accounts for 40% of Poland's total population (Stanny, Komorowski, 2024). The second decade of the 21st century is a period of intense demographic ageing in Polish rural areas. It is influenced by socio-economic factors as well as socio-cultural changes, characteristic of the so-called "second demographic transition." From 2020, there will be a steady increase in the number of people of retirement age (so-called "grandparents") in rural areas compared to the number of people of pre-reproductive age (so-called "grandchildren") (Stanny, Komorowski, 2022). However, it should be noted that rural areas in Poland are demographically diverse and the ageing process is not equally advanced throughout the country. The areas with the least favourable demographic structure are in eastern and central Poland, but in the last two decades, the fastest ageing regions have been in western Poland (Stanny, Komorowski, 2024).

In the United States, 14% of the total population lived in rural areas in 2020, and this percentage is likely to decrease in the future. In 85% of rural counties in the USA, 20% or more of the population is aged 65 and over (Cromartie,

2018). The ageing of rural areas in the US has two causes. On the one hand, it is often due to the outflow of young people, who are forced out of the countryside as a result of structural changes in the agricultural and industrial sectors. Furthermore, areas with attractive natural landscapes attract older people from larger cities who are looking for peace and a good quality of life in retirement (Matysiak, 2022). The ageing of Iowa, which is the focus of this article, is mainly due to the first type of process. Between 2012 and 2016, the proportion of people aged 65 and over reached 41.1%, compared to the national average for rural areas of 22.9% (Smith, Trevelyan, 2019).

The trends accompanying demographic ageing in Poland, the United States and other countries of the Global North are, above all, longevity, as well as the individualisation, feminisation and singularisation of old age. This means that the number of very old people (80 years and over) is increasing, and the category of older people is becoming highly diverse, both in socio-demographic terms and in terms of the different course of the ageing process and attitudes towards one's old age. Women are by far the majority among the elderly. It is important to note that more and more senior citizens live in single-person households, which is not only due to widowhood but also to the increasing number of people choosing to live alone and being childless.

In Poland, the situation of older people in rural areas is rarely the subject of interest for contemporary researchers. For example, the results of the *Pol-senior 2* survey show that the quality of life of older Poles is rated worse among those living in rural areas than in cities (Tobiasz-Adameczyk, 2021). In the research conducted by Katarzyna Białobrzaska, Cezary Kurkowski and Monika Maciejewska (2017) conducted in 2016 in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship, the respondents pointed to a lack of economic and health security (financial constraints and poor access to healthcare), as well as a feeling of alienation in the family and rural environment. Also worth mentioning are the ethnographic studies by Urszula Lehr (2007) conducted among older residents of the Podhale and Silesian Beskids regions, as well as the report by Sylwia Michalska, Dominika Zwęglińska-Gałecka, and Maria Halamska (2024), devoted to the rural hospice as a social innovation in the field of care.

In Western literature, there is a tendency to stereotype the experience of rural old age either positively or negatively (Wenger, 2001). On the one hand, rural environments are portrayed as lacking access to basic services and often condemning older people to a life of poverty and exclusion. On the other hand, idyllic images of rural communities are evoked as being rich in social capital that guarantees help and support for the elderly. In the case of the United States, the most comprehensive study, edited by Nina Glasgow and E. Helen Berry

(2013), shows the country's rural population and its changes based on statistical data. It discusses, among other things, the issues of assistance and support, family relationships, as well as ethnic and racial differences. As in Poland, research on the ageing of the rural population is undertaken by a relatively small group of researchers.

Informal support and assistance for elderly people living in rural areas

Based on the concept of systems, whose mechanisms are the conditions of social inclusion or exclusion and the quality of life of older rural residents, *private*, *state*, and *voluntary* systems (Philip, Shucksmith, 2003) seem to be relatively the best-researched and described. For example, previous studies have documented the difficulties of older rural residents in accessing various types of services, including health and care services (Burholt, Dobbs, 2012). Attention has also been paid to the involvement of rural residents, including the elderly, in local community organisations and other structures working for the benefit of the local community. There is evidence that the elderly are overburdened with voluntary activities (Wiersma, Koster, 2013). In Poland, for example, studies are being carried out on village housewives' associations and their role in building bonds between older women (Matysiak, 2016) or publications on non-governmental sector initiatives stimulating the social activity of older rural residents (Czapiewska, 2019).

In the case of the latter system, which involves *family and friends networks* (Philip, Shucksmith, 2003), researchers have so far focused on informal carers of older people within the family. The issue of informal support for older people by neighbours, friends and acquaintances has been addressed relatively rarely (Walsh, O'Shea, Scharf, & Shucksmith, 2014). It is most often mentioned as a way of supplementing formal and informal support within the family. The examples that appear in the literature relate to support in the so-called "*IADL*," i.e., *Instrumental Activities of Daily Living*, including shopping, preparing meals and transport. For example, American studies conducted in rural areas indicate that neighbours and friends often offer the elderly a ride or help with snow removal (Brown, Glasgow, Kulcsar, Sanders, & Thiede, 2019). Neighbourhood vigilance is also pointed out, allowing for the quick identification of potential problems, e.g., when an older person does not leave the house for a long time (Walsh et al., 2014).

In the context of rural communities in the USA and other Western countries, research can also be found indicating that local specialists, e.g., medical personnel or civil servants, often exceed the formal scope of their duties to help someone they know. This can include, for example, assistance in filling out forms, giving

advice, providing a lift in their car, etc. (Walsh et al., 2014). This is usually an expression of their attachment to the place and rootedness in the local community, where formal and informal social roles intertwine, but it can also be a consequence of budget cuts (Walsh et al., 2014).

In the case of Poland, there is a lack of research focusing on informal support provided to older people by neighbours, friends or acquaintances in rural areas. Such topics appear sporadically in analyses concerning, for example, neighbourly relations, in which older, often lonely people are helped by their neighbours to carry firewood or deliver shopping (Matysiak, 2019).

Methods and materials

The qualitative data used in the text comes from the author's research conducted in Poland and the USA. The aim is not to conduct a systematic comparison, but to draw attention to similar phenomena occurring in small rural local communities despite cultural differences. This analysis is preliminary and is an invitation to discussion and more in-depth research.

The data for Poland was collected in 2023 in three rural municipalities, two of which are located in the northeastern part of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship and one in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship. These municipalities are not directly adjacent to larger urban centres. A total of 60 in-depth interviews were conducted, 20 in each municipality*. For each of them, half of the interviews were conducted with residents aged 65+, and half with local informants, who were representatives of local authorities, organisations and institutions**. The recruitment process used a combination of purposeful selection and the snowball method, and care was taken to ensure diversity in the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents aged 65+.

The US data was collected in 2022 in four small rural towns in the state of Iowa. The study was conducted during the author's fellowship at Iowa State University, where she carried out a project funded under the Bekker Programme of the National Agency for Academic Exchange (agreement no. BPN/BEK/2020/1/00435/U/00001). A total of 49 interviews were conducted in all four

* The interviews in Mazovia were conducted as part of an internship by sociology students at the Maria Grzegorzewska University of Special Education. The interviews in the Masurian municipality were conducted by Dr Jowita Bartczak as part of her research project, funded by the University of Special Education.

**In some cases, local informants were also aged 65 or over.

locations (between ten and a dozen in each), mostly individual, but in some cases also in the form of a dyad and one mini-focus group. The categories of interviewees and the method of recruitment were similar to those of the Polish study.

The interview scenarios were similar in Poland and the USA. They included questions about the availability of local services, as well as formal and informal types of support for the elderly. The interviews lasted about an hour on average. All of them were recorded, and their transcripts were subjected to qualitative analysis in Maxqda 2024. The Polish and American data were coded separately, although according to a similar scheme. The coding procedure was deductive-inductive (Kuckartz, Rädiker, 2023). In the case of American data, interviews, transcripts and the coding process were carried out in English. The quotations from them cited in the text are the author's Polish translations.

Results

This section will discuss examples of identified types of informal support and non-family assistance provided to older people living in rural areas in Poland and Iowa (USA). It will also attempt to identify factors that strengthen or weaken the occurrence of these types of practices.

Neighbourhood watch

Both in rural communities in Poland and Iowa, the interviewees agreed that in their communities, people know their neighbours, are interested in their situation and can react quickly if necessary. They notice when an older person does not leave the house for a long time or does not show up at the local shop or church. Long-term neighbours, in particular, know their habits and routines. The following statements were made: "The neighbour of the neighbour makes sure that people pay attention to each other: she was at church, she wasn't at church, and do you know what happened to her? People ask each other like that" [11.PL.S_I.K]*. "My neighbours are like carers to me, they take a keen interest in me, whether I got up, whether the door is open, where I went, and why the light isn't on here" [6.PL.P_S.K]. "I sometimes work in the garage at night and once forgot to close

* Quotes from interviews are labelled as follows: interview number (separate numbering for Polish and American interviews), abbreviation PL or US, first letter of the name of the municipality or town where the interviews were conducted, letter "I" or "S" to indicate the category of the interlocutor ("Informant" or "Senior") and gender of the respondent ("K" [woman] or "M" [man]).

the door. The neighbour across the street saw our house. She called and asked if I had gone to bed yet because she noticed that the garage door was open” [44.US.SC_S.M].

According to the respondents, such neighbourly interest in another person may be perceived as prying by an outside observer, but in their understanding, it is a natural consequence of living side by side in a small community. This kind of neighbourly vigilance is particularly important for elderly people living alone, and in certain circumstances, it can save someone’s life:

I also had an older lady here and I helped her a lot [...]. And even if I hadn’t seen her for a long time, I would call her. There was even a situation where she was supposed to come to my place in the morning and she didn’t show up. So I called her. I called for a very long time. I couldn’t get through to her, so I went to her place [...]. She just sat there and started talking to me about random things. I immediately called an ambulance – she had a stroke [17.PL.P_I.K].

I think people care about their neighbours. Once, our electricity went out and we went to our neighbour’s house to see what was wrong. He was sitting in the dark. He didn’t know where his wife kept the flashlights and she was already in a nursing home. So we brought him a battery-powered lamp [2.US.MA_I.K].

In interviews, examples were given of situations in which neighbours, concerned that an older person had not answered the phone for a long time, contacted the person’s family or representatives of local institutions. Neighbours also intervene in extreme situations indicating neglect or self-neglect of older people. This is illustrated by the statements of local informants from a commune in the Mazovia region, as well as from a small town in Iowa: “[...] the neighbours are very vigilant and it’s not about being nosy or arrogant, it’s just that they react and we are informed immediately” [12.PL.S_I.M].

They call us because they know that these [elderly people] are our customers. They say: I haven’t seen them leave the house in the last 24 hours. We have these cases all the time. This is another advantage of a small, rural local community. Everyone is watching out for you in some way. [...] everyone wants to make sure that everything is OK [42.US.SC_I.K].

In interviews from both Poland and Iowa, there were also examples of the vigilance of the entire local community, which keeps an eye on elderly people with

dementia or disabilities. The inhabitants of a given village or town know these people and their situation and are ready to react or provide assistance.

Neighbourly help

Examples of neighbourly help were often mentioned in all three rural communities in Poland and the towns in Iowa. This help includes various activities of everyday life, e.g., chopping firewood, bringing coal, giving lifts to the doctor or church, helping with shopping, buying medication, preparing meals or clearing snow, calling an ambulance, helping with various small repairs, as well as emotional support in the form of visits and conversations: “[...] even in winter, they will come and clear the snow. If they can’t cook something for themselves, they will just bring something that someone else has cooked” [17.PL.S_I.K]. “[...] we visit them and talk to them because I think talking to someone is what they lack” [8.PL.P_S.K]. “Yes, there is always a neighbour or someone who will give you a lift... If someone needs a lift, they just call someone to come and pick them up or help them get into the car” [11.US.G_S.M].

In the Polish municipalities, the need for transport assistance was due to the limitations of local public transport, which, however, according to the respondents, has improved in recent years. In Iowa towns, public transport is not available at all, which is a consequence of the different development models and public service systems in the two countries.

Neighbourly help does not always take the form of regular support. In light of the interviews, even relaxed everyday neighbourly relations allow you to feel safe in a crisis when you need quick, ad hoc help: “[...] when I fell off the pushchair in the bathroom and started screaming, this neighbour came with her daughter and lifted me, put me in the pushchair and helped me. [...] they don’t hurt me, they don’t help, but they do what’s necessary...” [11.PL.P_S.K].

For older people without family and with problems moving around independently, neighbours are often the most important source of support and help, especially given the limited number of hours of community care provided by the municipal social welfare centre.

In the Polish context, the COVID-19 pandemic period has proven to be a test of neighbourly relations and the support provided. In the surveyed municipalities, the interviewees indicated that they could count on help and support from their neighbours: “[...] the neighbours did the shopping, then hung it on the fence, put up little notes, I just wrote down who the receipt was from and then settled up” [12.PL.D_S.K].

In American studies, special support from local service providers or institutions, such as shops and pharmacies delivering groceries or medicines, was much more frequently mentioned in this situation than neighbourly help.

It should be noted that in a rural commune in Masuria, there were statements that neighbourly help is not always provided free of charge. Some respondents pointed out that it all depends on the degree of familiarity in the neighbourhood: “Well, it depends on the neighbourhood relations, but if there are no relations, then usually such a service is paid for, informally somehow. Well, they just pay cash for someone to take them to the doctor...” [5.PL.P_I.K].

In the American study, the issues of payment or lack of payment for neighbourhood assistance provided turned out to be somewhat clearer. The instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) support mentioned earlier is most often provided free of charge. Payments are made for services provided by residents as part of their business activities, e.g., for grounds maintenance (snow removal, lawn care) or cleaning. A small allowance is also usually given to local children and young people, who can use it to pay for their own small expenses.

Providing mutual assistance and support to the elderly in rural areas

Particularly noteworthy is the support provided by other older residents who are slightly younger or in better health, which was evident in both the Polish and American surveys. The help often involves transport, shopping, or preparing meals: “[...] my mum can’t walk because her knees are bad, so her friend and her friend’s husband take her to church, and when she goes shopping, they come with her and help her with the shopping” [7.PL.P_I.K].

A study conducted in small towns in Iowa shows the special role of peer relationships. They can be more important than relationships with children or grandchildren, who have different needs and experiences, and above all, their own lives. One of the interviewees, a 70-year-old local informant, told about her sister who had moved to a bigger city to be closer to her family. However, after her husband died, she returned to her hometown because she felt alienated. In her hometown, she belongs to an informal social group of older women:

[...] there are 25 or 26 ladies who are widows, their husbands died. They are all in their seventies. They meet, they have their interests, they go to church together, they go out for a meal together, they play cards and things like that, they have their own entertainment in this group [4.US.MA_I.K].

This is confirmed by the results of other American studies (e.g., Cook, Martin, Yearn, & Damhorst, 2007). In Polish interviews, one of the local informants from a commune in Masuria, a community nurse, observed the operation of social networks based on sociability and friendship in her environment. They provide not only emotional support but also practical help: “[...] sometimes I visit a patient,

she has three friends, they all advise her on what to do and how to do it. And these are older ladies. [...] I see how they take care of this garden for their friend” [18.PL.P_I.K].

[...] I have a patient who [...] has severe mobility limitations and my colleagues are better able to get him to the doctor than [...] a professional medical transport service because he has high expectations. He wants to be transported properly, he wants to be free of pain and strain, he knows in which position he is to be transported and moved, and his colleagues are better at helping him [18.PL.P_I.K].

It should be noted that the researcher described both of the aforementioned elderly people as very sociable. At the same time, even more casual social relationships are often used as a channel for exchanging information, e.g., about available medical or care services.

Informal help and support from representatives of institutions

Both in the interviews conducted in Poland and Iowa, there were examples of informal assistance provided to the elderly by people representing various local institutions. For example, people working in the municipal social welfare centre identified themselves and were identified as trying to help with any matter:

[...] we are here to help, we take care of everything, we help people get a pension, for example. [...] We don't turn people away. If someone comes with any kind of problem, we try to help. [...] we really do a range of things, even if there are sometimes elderly people who can't look after themselves, we make doctor's appointments for them [10.PL.P_I.K].

The particularly touching stories are about the social workers and community nurses from a rural municipality in Masuria, who try to visit their lonely elderly charges as often as possible: “[...] some of the ladies, when I come for an interview or, for example, if she has been granted care services, they seem to cling to my hand so that we can talk for a while, so that the lady can come in between work to talk, even if it's just for a moment, right?” [10.PL.P_I.K].

[The older woman] had a carer from the Social Welfare Centre, family abroad and was alone. She was in her eighties and I was with her for two years, kind of participating in her life. [...] I would do some shopping for her or help her cook something, I was in her house very often. [...] At the weekend I would come by, if I was popping in here for something, I would go to her place, see

how she was doing, if she had eaten, etc. [18.PL.P_I.K].

In Iowa, the actions taken by the female employees of the local library in one of the towns are an illustration of this phenomenon. They decided to react to the situation of extreme self-neglect observed in an elderly reader:

[...] this man wasn't eating. [...] He didn't have any family here. We felt we had to intervene. So we started calling his friends to get him enrolled in the Meals on Wheels programme and to make sure someone would visit him*. [...] That day, because we knew he hadn't eaten anything, we went to the grocery store and bought him chicken for dinner." [25.US.SC_I.K].

In other Iowa towns, too, local librarians reported that they have developed warm, friendly relationships with their older readers. They pay them a lot of attention and take an interest in their situation, for example by calling if a person does not come to the library for a long time or on their "usual" days.

Support from neighbours and friends

Firstly, the frequency and intensity of neighbourly assistance depends on whether the elderly person has a spouse or partner and other family members living in the area. It also depends on the nature of the assistance provided. If the closest family members are not available, the previously described support in instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) is provided by them, e.g. help with shopping, transport, cooking, cleaning, etc. Neighbours or friends provide support when family members are not available (no family in the immediate vicinity, poor relationship with the older person or lack of interest in the older person). Neighbours and friends can also supplement family care by providing emotional support or relieving the primary caregivers of certain tasks, such as transport or shopping.

In some cases, regular paid neighbourhood assistance is arranged by the children of older rural residents who have moved to the city or abroad. In this case, daily support in basic (ADL) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) is a kind of substitute for informal family care:

[...] I visited my neighbours for five years; there were two grandparents

* In the "Meals on Wheels" programme, volunteers deliver cheap, nutritious meals to the homes of elderly and disabled people. In the USA, the programme is run by MOWAAF (The Meals on Wheels Association of America Foundation). Similar programmes run by local organisations or institutions are often referred to by this name.

over eighty years old. The children were grown up, they had moved to Warsaw and they needed help with things like preparing food, making their beds, preparing their pills and making sure they took them. [...] later, there were all kinds of things to do, like helping them get dressed, help them lie down, change and everything... We took turns with our mother-in-law and I think the children took care of them in such a way that it was as if we were hired to make sure that those parents were well, that they were somehow looked after, that they were not cold, that they were not hungry, so that they could simply live in good health [11.PL.S_I.K].

It seems that the least common form of help from neighbours and friends is financial. At least in Poland, this type of support is most often provided to the elderly by children or other family members. It usually concerns assistance in instrumental activities of daily living (IADL), and support in basic activities of daily living (ADL) only occurs in a situation of regular paid care, e.g., the aforementioned provision of long-distance family care by paid neighbours. Basic activities include those considered to be the most intimate, i.e., feeding or assistance with personal hygiene.

In the US, older rural residents are much more likely to be in a situation where immediate family members do not live in the area, for example, but in another distant state. In such cases, the primary source of family care is the spouse, and social networks based on neighbourhood, friendship or involvement in a religious community complement this care. They become crucial in the absence of a spouse or partner.

However, it should be noted that in interviews conducted in rural communes in Poland and in small towns in Iowa, especially the latter, the tendency of older people to “spare” their immediate family members in terms of help and support was also pointed out, as well as the reluctance to “be a burden” on their loved ones (cf. Anderson, Larkins, Beaney, & Ray, 2018).

Both the Polish and American studies included statements in which neighbourly help was correlated with the strength of social relationships, e.g., long-standing neighbourhood relations, compact spatial development in the locality and similar life experiences (working in the neighbourhood, children of a similar age):

[...] where I live, on [name] Street, it’s like a separate village, a kind of “congestion,” and here in these backyards we all live together, we enjoy each other’s company, we go through things together... If something is needed, one person helps or lends to another... [6.PL.P_S.K].

[...] everyone knows everyone. They will do everything they can [for them] because they either grew up with them, know them from church or school, or their son or granddaughter knew their son, daughter or grandchildren. Everyone knows each other in these small rural towns [46.US.G_I.K].

In the case of Poland, it was also indicated that there was less spatial mobility in the past, which led to the formation of local networks based on kinship and affinity.

The practice of non-family assistance, especially within the framework of a network of mutual support for the elderly, is also favoured by shared experiences of involvement in local organisations or groups. The bonds that are formed and strengthened in such a context can translate into practical assistance, e.g., in transport: “[...] I see that friends are in a women’s group [...] and they help each other, [...] I see that these people still function together in the community, that they help each other, that they support each other, that they do each other’s shopping” [18.PL.P_I.K]. “[...] when I went to see that neighbour, the one who lived far away, who was part of our rosary group, we said we would go and help her there with something...” [22.PL.D_S.K].

In Iowa, one of the most bonding local organisations were churches, especially Protestant ones. They organised support for the elderly in the form of transport or meal delivery. An elderly woman living in one of the towns said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when services and meetings were suspended, she regularly called elderly members of the congregation to ask how they were feeling. “I started calling active members of the women’s group at our Methodist church regularly [...]. It was great because I would call them and we would start talking. [...] We would continue the conversation an hour later or even longer” [3.US.MA_S.K].

However, it should be emphasised that neighbourly vigilance and sensitivity to problems is not always unconditional. It does not include people who violate social norms, for example, those who constantly abuse alcohol: “There are people who die alone, right? [...] a man was found simply because the smell bothered the neighbours, right? [...] If these are places where there is alcohol or alcohol abuse, they are often places not visited by others” [18.PL.P_I.K].

This is reminiscent of the moral discourses identified in a West Siberian village by Rebecca Kay (2011) that determine who in the local community deserves help and who does not. People who are new to a given locality may also be excluded from informal mechanisms of support and care in the local community.

It should be emphasised that in the Polish interviews, there were also statements indicating that neighbourly help is not always welcome by older people. Trust

in a neighbour is not a rule, and the help provided can be perceived as self-interested or leading to the exploitation of an older person, e.g. persuading them to sign over their house or land. Offered neighbourly help can be rejected as unnecessary or as an expression of excessive interference in other people's affairs. In contrast, an American study emphasised the reluctance of older people to ask others for help. They perceive it as a threat to their own autonomy and independence.

Conclusion

The ageing of the rural population observed in both Poland and the United States, as well as the accompanying longevity, individualisation, feminisation, and singularisation of old age, create challenges not only for researchers but also for policy-makers and practitioners. It is very important to recognise the potential of informal support from outside the family, including that provided within the networks created by the elderly themselves.

The results of our own research show that, in both the Polish and American contexts, informal support from neighbours, friends and acquaintances plays a very important role. This primarily includes assistance with instrumental activities of daily living (IADL). Neighbours, friends or acquaintances also often provide emotional support, i.e., they fulfil the need for conversation, companionship and contact with other people. Financial assistance or support with the most intimate basic activities of daily living (ADL) is less common.

The intensity of this support depends on the availability of family care as well as the nature of social ties. It is fostered by many years of cohabitation in the same neighbourhood, as well as similar life experiences and previous contacts related to, for example, professional work. It can also be strengthened by belonging to a local organisation, such as a rural housewives' association or a religious group. The latter, especially Protestant groups, are of particular importance in the communities studied in Iowa, as they organise local social life there (cf. Wuthnow, 2015). This type of support can weaken in the face of deviant behaviour, such as alcohol abuse by an older person. Informal support mechanisms may also be more difficult for newcomers to a village to access.

Further, more systematic research is needed on informal non-family support mechanisms for older people living in rural areas. The relationship between these and other systems, such as informal family care, market systems, public systems and systems based on social involvement, which influence the available resources and quality of life, should also be analysed (cf. Philip, Shucksmith, 2003). The interdependence of informal and formal care should also be examined

(e.g., Timonen, 2008), including the potential for the “formalisation” of non-family support. For example, one of the surveyed towns in Iowa was covered by the government’s “Senior Companion” programme. This programme connects single senior citizens with other senior citizens who act as their “companions” according to a mutually agreed contract. This can include visiting and spending time together, helping with transport or preparing meals. This role is voluntary, but senior volunteers receive reimbursement for some of the expenses they incur, such as petrol.

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