

# Ageing activists: who gets involved in older people's forums?

MARIAN BARNES\*, ELIZABETH HARRISON† and  
LESLEY MURRAY\*

## **ABSTRACT**

Based on research with members of two Senior Citizens Forums in the South East of England, this article examines the biographies and motivations of those who get involved in such activities, with particular emphasis on (a) how they see themselves in relation to 'other older people' and (b) their relationships with the places in which they live. We address these issues in relation to the characterisation of participants in such forums as the 'usual suspects' whose legitimacy to speak on behalf of others may be questioned, and by reference to a growing recognition of the significance of place in the lives of older people. Whilst the locations of the two Forums studied are geographically close, culturally they are quite distinct and we identify important differences in motivations, backgrounds and priorities of forum members in the two places that are associated with these differences. Our research confirms that place-based participation tends to engage those who are fitter and who have more social and cultural capital, but questions assumptions that this means they are spaces for the pursuit of self-interest.

**KEY WORDS** – participation, place, motivations, older people's forums, identities.

## **Introduction**

A key theme in analysis of public participation in governance and service delivery is the question of 'who takes part'. This question is asked both of participation in general and of older people's participation in particular. Policy makers and practitioners aim to secure broadly based participation that can be regarded as generating an authentic voice for older people and thus ensure that the claims made from within such participatory spaces can be seen as robust and worthy of being taken seriously. A failure to go beyond what are often referred to in policy and practice circles as the 'usual suspects' is considered to constitute a failure in terms of developing 'real'

\* School of Applied Social Science, University of Brighton, UK.

† Social Anthropology, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

participation – in spite of consistent evidence that a small minority of the population ever take an active part in participatory politics (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004). For older people who want to get involved, overcoming the barriers to participation that they face and securing a place for themselves within forums that are intended to enable older people to exert influence on policy and services, can lead to their legitimacy to speak out being questioned – precisely because they become defined as an atypical minority.

In this article, we draw on two pieces of research conducted with members of older people's forums in East Sussex, England. The first project involved participatory research with members of one forum to explore issues that prompt their participation and their experiences of this. The second comprised biographical interviews with members of two forums with particular reference to mobility and participation over their lifespan. We consider who these older participants are and what motivates their involvement in the forums. In particular, we consider the way in which changing relationships with place as people grow older may impact on their participation in processes intended to enable them to influence public policy and service delivery.

But first, we consider in more detail both theoretical and empirical reflections on the 'problem' of who takes part.

### **Representation, barriers and motivations**

Much of the debate about the legitimacy of participants in governance processes is constructed around different conceptions of representation (Barnes *et al.* 2003). Those who assume a statistical notion of representativeness want to establish whether participants are 'representative' of the broader population in terms of socio-economic and other characteristics – *i.e.* are they 'like' other members of the population in terms of variables that are both measurable and assumed to be important (such as gender, 'race', class, disability status). Analysis of the characteristics of participants in these terms can identify structural exclusions that are operating, and thus determine both who is present and who is absent from deliberations intended to shape policy and service delivery. One example of this is work by Broese van Groenou and Deeg (2010) who explore the 'social determinants' of social participation amongst different cohorts of older people in the Netherlands by considering educational level, chronic disease, paid employment, marital status, age and gender. They account for an increase in what they refer to as 'formal social participation': 'activities in which a person is of service to groups or individuals in the community through their involvement in political and voluntary organisations' among young-old

cohorts (60–69) between 1992 and 2002 by an increase in the educational level amongst those cohorts.

Democratic theorists who advocate a ‘politics of presence’ (Phillips 1995) point to the absence of specific groups (women, different ethnic groups) from political institutions and link ‘what’ is represented within political decision-making process with ‘who’ is doing the representation. Thus, there is a link between statistical and democratic notions of representation. However, a more common democratic understanding of representation is that this refers to the basis on which representatives claim authority to speak on behalf of people, rather than the expectation that representatives will share characteristics with those they represent. In systems of representative democracy this is determined by election and the accountability that accompanies this. Elections do take place to determine participants in some forms of participatory governance, but this is not typical and there is a tension between the principles and practice of deliberative democracy – that requires openness to transformation of views and positions through the process of deliberation (Dryzek 2000), and systems that assume representatives who take a mandated position and are accountable to a particular constituency. Within participatory governance processes, the question of whether participants can be considered legitimate representatives of older people requires consideration of the basis on which they might be able to ‘speak for’ older people who are not directly involved, and whether they can and should be accountable to them. Warburton and Petriwskyj (2007) distinguish two different bases on which older people might be considered legitimate participants: because they bring lived experience of growing older to the policy table, or because they are members of representative organisations that lobby on behalf of older people. This distinction reflects a broader distinction between ‘local knowledge’ and ‘local representation’ as a basis for participation in participatory governance processes (Barnes *et al.* 2008).

Barnes and Shaw (2000) and Gould (2007) have identified barriers to older people taking part in initiatives intended to enable them to have a voice. These can be personal, circumstantial, institutional, and relate to the design of participatory practices. There is also evidence of the very different approaches necessary to enable older people who may be experiencing poor health, and/or who are in receipt of social-care services to have their say about the services essential to their health and wellbeing (Barnes and Bennet 1998). We also know that there is a relationship between the design and composition of participatory forums, the nature of the deliberation that takes place within them, and the potential for transformative change arising from this (Barnes 2005). One model of participation is unlikely to resolve the dilemmas about inclusion/exclusion and representativeness.

Questions about who takes part also require consideration of why they do so – what motivates people to take part in activities that can be considered to come within the spectrum of voluntary/political action? Barnes *et al.* (2006, 2007) have addressed motivations amongst participants in a range of participatory governance initiatives, including those involving older people. They identified a number of ‘commitments’ that were evident amongst participants and that were influential in their decisions to get involved: commitments to a place, a ‘people’ (*i.e.* a specific ethnic group), or a cause or causes (which could include lifelong commitments to a range of causes such as women’s rights, anti-poverty issues); commitments to a set of values – including those associated with religious faith; and commitments deriving from personal experiences of difference, disadvantage or oppression. But, they also highlighted other factors, in particular the nature of people’s social networks, that have also been identified as implicated in social movement mobilisation, and which may be important in understanding decisions to get involved in collective action by older people. Petriwskyj and Warburton (2007) reviewed the literature on motivations and barriers to older people’s decisions to become volunteers. They identify key motivators as: helping values; the social aspects of volunteering; the importance of opportunities to make a contribution to their community or to society; to use their skills, share knowledge, to learn or develop new skills and be intellectually stimulated; and to feel good or needed. But the authors point out that most studies neglect the diversity both of what might be considered ‘voluntary activities’ and of older people themselves. They also suggest a need for a more nuanced conceptual understanding of motivations, for example the need to distinguish ‘helping’ from altruism. From his review of research on older people’s participation, Nick Gould (2007) proposes a conceptual model of factors leading to what he refers to as ‘sustained volunteerism’. This model encompasses demographic characteristics, personal beliefs and values; pro-social personality, specific volunteer-related motives, situational factors; social pressure, and relationships with organisations and their attributes. This work all suggests that the social construction of participants as ‘usual suspects’ conceals a complex interplay between personal, social, cultural, political and spatial factors that lead to particular individuals becoming involved in particular participation initiatives. There is a need for contextualised analysis of both the ‘who’ and ‘why’ of older people’s participation and what implications this has for developmental strategies.

The discursive construction of people as ‘usual suspects’ can sometimes be a way of undermining the legitimacy of their contributions to participatory governance. Other constructions: as community leaders, committed volunteers, advocates, knowledgeable experts, for example, offer a rather different perspective on the role and characteristics of participants.

But there is also a genuine concern that the distribution of 'opportunities' for participation is too narrow, that some people are doing too much and others are not getting a look in—because the design of participatory processes or the rules and norms associated with these are exclusive, because people simply do not know what the opportunities are or because their personal, social, economic and spatial circumstances make it hard for them to take part.

The spatial influences on patterns of older people's participation have been neglected in theoretical and empirical debates in social science, although there is a body of literature, particularly in human geography, that emphasises the importance of older people in constructing space and place. Mowl *et al.* (2000) explore the significance of space, and particularly notions of 'home', in constructing notions of 'appropriate' place for older people and older people's identification, whilst Biggs and Tinker's (2007) work on age-friendly environments stresses the positive impact of older people in particular urban spaces in building social cohesion and in challenging spatial exclusion. More broadly, the importance of place has been debated in relation to normative assumptions about particular social (marginalised) groups being 'in-place' and 'out of place' (Cresswell 1996; Massey 1994; Sibley 1981). In particular, it is suggested that such groups construct space and place through processes of resistance to such discourses of spatial constraint. Locality and place can also be synonyms for belonging, providing a sense of collective identity and cohesion (Lovell 1998). Conversely, a 'lack of community' is seen as being associated with weakened citizenship and arguably felt most acutely in areas where the population is more transitory and subject to fluctuation (Rapport and Dawson 1998).

A more recent collection of papers focuses specifically on participatory practices, arguing that 'participation itself is inherently spatial' (Pain and Kindon 2007: 2807). Although it is focused on emerging participatory research theory and practice in geography, it also engages with the mutually constituted concepts of space, place and participation on a wider level. It is argued that space is constructed through practices of participation, but also that the nature of participation is such that it requires the negotiation of different scales of engagement, from local to global and that participation is 'embedded within particular spaces and places' (Pain and Kindon 2007: 2808).

In this article, we consider how older people who had joined senior citizens forums in one part of England, East Sussex, spoke about their involvement in the context of their lives. We consider issues of importance to older people, what they thought of relationships between the forums and 'other older people' and how all of this intersects with their views on the nature of the places in which they live.

East Sussex has the highest proportion of over 85 s in England and there are nearly three people of pension age to every two children under 16. One response to this has been the establishment of seven older people's forums across the county to provide a mechanism for dialogue between the county council, the Primary Care Trusts (which commissioned health services), other public agencies and older people. These forums have been led and shaped by older people themselves, including decisions about the geographical area covered by each forum. Collectively the forums constitute the East Sussex Seniors Association (ESSA), which is recognised by public bodies as the key focus for consulting older people about policies and service delivery.

## Methods

Members of one of these forums, Meridian, approached university researchers for help in researching their members' experiences of growing older and of being heard through the forums. We designed interview schedules with forum members, some of whom also undertook interviews, working with university students. A total of 61 interviews with forum members were carried out during this stage of the work. We established a relationship with the forum which enabled development of more ethnographic work focusing on the forum in the context of broader participation activities across the county. The authors undertook longer-term participant observation at forum meetings and other events and subsequently developed a second stage of interviews with six Meridian members and eight members of the neighbouring Lewes forum. This article is based on interview analysis, which was itself informed by the participatory process of the first stage work, and insights developed through observations.

People's own words are central to understanding how they perceive their own places and spaces (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2006) and are thus central to our analysis. The initial set of interviews was transcribed and themes identified through discussion with the forum members and students who undertook interviews. The first two authors then undertook a detailed thematic analysis, leading to the production of a report that considered experiences of growing older and of the consultation processes that were being developed in the county.

One of the strongest themes emerging from these interviews was the significance of their relationship to place in shaping people's decisions to get involved. The Meridian Forum draws its members from the port town of Newhaven, the coastal strip to the west and some inland rural villages. We found a sharp contrast between residents of the town of Newhaven and

those living in neighbouring areas. Newhaven residents were strongly motivated by a wish to right the wrongs they perceived as being done to their town by external actors, and by a deep-seated affection for the town. This was rooted in length of residence and a feeling of being part of a community; a sense of belonging consolidating attachment to place. Newhaven has strong generational continuity and grew up around a few large employers and industries, which are now either gone or in decline. In this respect it is very different from its more affluent, retirement and service industry-oriented neighbours.

Our emerging findings led us to ask further questions about how people engage and why, and what difference we might find between participation in a place like Newhaven and a more affluent location such as Lewes. We approached the committees of both forums who then contacted their membership directly for volunteers – or volunteered themselves. The second set of interviews focused directly on the biography of respondents, the history of their engagement, and the relationship to the places in which they lived. Again, the interviews were transcribed and we drew from the previous analysis and on literature on place, identity and ageing to organise interview responses in relation to the following themes:

1. Mobility over the lifecourse and relationship to place.
2. Political activity over the lifecourse.
3. What motivates involvement.
4. Nature of forum involvement.
5. Employment history.
6. Education, class, gender, personal circumstances.

Our approach here reflects Miller's (2000) discussion of the narrative approach to life history analysis, highlighting the subjective negotiations between individuals and their situations. In this study, the nature of place is central to understanding such negotiations so we start with a description of the two locations that were the focus of this work.

### **Participation in place**

Situated on the edge of the South Downs National Park, at the mouth of the river Ouse and between the coastal resorts of Brighton and Eastbourne, Newhaven is surrounded by both affluence and natural beauty. However, both physically and in terms of indicators of deprivation, Newhaven is very different from its surroundings. The main road through the town now encircles the old town centre, making it almost invisible to passing traffic. Driving out of town, cars pass an industrial estate to one side, and a retail

park to the other. To the north, an incinerator is being built and now dominates the skyline. Along the river towards the sea, there is evidence both of Newhaven's industrial past and present, and of efforts to regenerate the town: new flats and a marina sit opposite a pile of scrap metal and derelict marine workshops. Significant indicators of deprivation reinforce a view that Newhaven does not fit the stereotype of the wealthy south-east of England. The proportion of children in receipt of free school meals is 73 per cent higher than the district average; shop vacancies in 2009 were among the highest in the United Kingdom (UK); in August 2009, the local Member of Parliament announced that Newhaven was hit worse by the recession than any other town in his constituency. Although a smaller proportion of Newhaven's 12,000 or so population is over 60 than elsewhere in the county, their life expectancy is lower.

By contrast, Lewes, the historic county town and which is only eight miles from Newhaven, appears much wealthier. Lewes, the home of the revolutionary Tom Paine, is presented in local and public discourse as both idiosyncratic and rebellious. It boasts numerous independent traders which thrive because there is a large enough constituency of relatively wealthy people (including academics from the nearby universities), who are prepared to pay to shop locally, and who celebrate Lewes's unconventional image. There is a thriving arts cinema in a disused church, theatre and music clubs, alternative and independent schools. Lewes does have pockets of deprivation and Newhaven is also changing; its stable long-term population has been added to by incomers purchasing flats in the new developments. Newhaven has been in receipt of some regeneration funds, including support to efforts to rebuild the town's physical infrastructure. But the contrast between the two towns remains strong.

### **Forum members: white, healthy and middle class?**

Only a very small proportion of our respondents referred to financial insecurity as being a concern to them. This is of course not a clear indicator of class position, but when combined with the fact that most of our respondents still used a car, almost all were home owners, and a great many came from professional employment backgrounds, it indicates that the forum membership is mainly 'middle class'. An unpublished survey carried out by the neighbouring Seaford forum supports this. It found that members were at the higher end of the social spectrum in terms of income or previous income and educational background, and that in these senses they were atypical of both the population as a whole and of older people in particular. The Seaford study also revealed its forum



membership to be less ethnically heterogeneous than the town as a whole. This is also the case with the Meridian respondents, all of whom were White British.

The members of the Meridian forum we spoke with varied in age from mid-fifties to early nineties. The majority were in their seventies and eighties. The Lewes interviewees were aged from mid-sixties to mid-seventies. Age aside, most of our respondents were 'active' in the sense of being reasonably fit and healthy and having an active and varied social life, including voluntary work, gardening, church attendance and sport. However, despite these generally high levels of activity, few people were 'activists' in the sense of being involved in politics or in challenging the status quo. In general, the experience of being on committees, or of taking part in formal consultation and participation, was limited to a few respondents. These people tended to combine high levels of engagement with articulate and forthright views on the changing nature of society.

These findings are perhaps not surprising. They arguably also provide easy support for the suggestion that the forums are not legitimate representatives of older people as a whole, as they represent a largely white and middle-class constituency who are themselves not experiencing old age as a time of hardship. However, these kinds of broad-brush data tell us very little about the meaning of membership for those who have joined, nor about how people engage.

### Motivation and engagement

What does motivate people to become part of the forums and who do they seek to represent? Is it the 'older old', frail, vulnerable, poorer older people? Or is it all older people, from a perspective of solidarity? From the perspective of social movement theory, do forum members develop a collective identity that sustains their mobilisation (Melucci 1996)? In other words, do representatives think in terms of 'them' or 'us' when they consider their constituency? Indeed do forum members see themselves as 'representative/s' at all?

The ways in which people engage with the forums covers a wide spectrum: from those whose motivation arises from a strong sense of social (in)justice and a wish to 'change the world', through to those whose engagement is limited and detached. The majority cluster at this latter end of the spectrum, respondents from both Lewes and Newhaven have both a somewhat distant engagement with the forums and a perception that they are mainly for 'others'. This ranges from those who say that they did not even realise that they were members, or were signed up by a friend or

spouse, to those who express mild detachment, or indeed are critical of the forums:

... it's more that I support the principle of these things and I'm willing to put my name to supporting the principle and to pay them money to run the thing, but I don't really want to take part at the grass roots level. (woman, 75, Newhaven (N))

I find them dead from the neck upwards to tell the truth. All they seem to do is send a letter to say that Sir so and so is coming to talk to you about how to apply for a heating grant. I mean for gods sake ... I find them as near useless as possible. They are not proactive. (man, 71, Lewes (L))

For several people, joining the forums is primarily about finding friends, in some cases related to a mobile life history. For example, one Lewes forum member described a lifetime of living in different countries and a tendency to get involved, almost regardless of the nature of the activity, wherever he is.

Having moved to a place, I just join everything, whether I agree with it or not. ... You arrive in a strange town where you know virtually nobody and my answer to that is to join lots of groups and get to know other people. (man, 76, L)

Even when people have not travelled extensively, for many, the forums are important for friendship and fellowship, especially when they are new to an area. One woman explained that she did not know anybody when she came to the town, so she joined things to meet people. In this sense, the forum plays the same role for her as her membership of a gardening club. Another woman also spoke about the social function of her extensive volunteering, to the extent that she stressed how she is happy to help anyone, even-handedly delivering leaflets for two different political parties.

Beyond this, the dominant perspective for many forum members is that the forums are for 'other' older people, not themselves. This is perhaps not surprising, given the profile of forum members as generally in reasonably good health and economically comfortable. The perspective may be associated with a general unwillingness among informants to see themselves as 'old', regardless of their chronological age:

[at a day-care centre] I served the lunches; I didn't have the lunch myself. And here you can tell, I freely admit, I'm an unconscious snob, and I didn't think I was old enough to go and sit down with these older people, they were all probably my age but I didn't think I was as old as them. (woman, 89, N)

If forum members generally perceive the forums to be for others than themselves in terms of both actual age and frailty, there is also frequently a class and economic dimension to this. Sometimes this can be strongly judgmental: 'Well I think it's for people who can't think for themselves, really, isn't it? And who can't organise their lives' (woman, 80, N). Even when less judgmental, the distancing is compounded by a sense that the forums are

intended for those who are not so well off or generally less fortunate and thus might reflect either altruism or a sense that more 'privileged' older people have a responsibility to act on behalf of those in less favourable circumstances:

Yes, and I must say for a lot of it I'm sitting on the outside looking in, you know. I feel that a lot of it is directed perhaps to people who are not as well circumstanced as I am, which is a good thing. I mean I feel that the bus services should be maintained, not for me because if I have to I can pay for taxis. (woman, 86, N)

However, this sense that the forums are a means of protecting the interests of less-fortunate older people may also be accompanied by a strong concern about issues of representation and presence. Whether critical of the forums, or merely reflective of the challenges they face, several people demonstrate an acute sensitivity to the rather homogeneous nature of forum membership, and to the fact that a limited group of people find themselves on the committees, often including themselves in this. They also stress the difficulties of finding ways of changing this situation. One even talks in terms of 'usual suspects':

I mean, there's the whole question of what kind of existence these forums have. They get a committee of people and they are the regulars and they are the usual suspects. I see them when I go round to various inter-forum meetings. ... You see the same faces: it's the Chairman and the Vice Chairman and the delegates and what not, and then they're the people you see. (man, 73, L)

It's really the ordinary person that can't do these things and I feel we should be representing their views more. ... We'd barely know our members if we met them in the street! ... I mean there are big council estates in Lewes but they're all hidden! None of our members come from the council estates. (woman, 71, L)

So, on the one hand, people are aware that the forums are 'unrepresentative' in the sense of being like those they seek to represent. On the other hand, for many, their own engagement is sufficiently limited for them not to be seen as representative in any other sense either. But what of the exceptions: those forum members for whom social justice and solidarity, combined with a wish to 'give something back', are important in their commitment to hard work for the forums? For these, their engagement is often associated with a more general willingness to speak out on different issues and a history of political engagement in other spheres. Whilst their current relationship with older people's forums takes priority, this is just one aspect of how and where they seek, and have sought, to make a difference. Closer examination of the motivation and background of these people, including how this links to place, also reveals some subtle differences between the two neighbouring towns, and begins to indicate how place intersects with identity factors to shape the diversity of those that may be labelled 'usual suspects'.

Explanations for the engagement of the more active members involve a combination of character, identity and personal history, all entwined with the pull of particular issues. In both Lewes and Newhaven, there are individuals who refer in general to their moral motivation; that it is in 'their nature' to act against injustice and unfairness, but also that there have been moments in their past which first prompted this. A narrative of 'public service' or of 'giving things back' is also common, again reflecting people's sensitivity to their own relative privilege. In this, the voluntarism of forum and other charitable activity is important. A member of the Lewes committee describes his engagement as arising from a growing understanding of the difficulties felt by many older people (again, not so much himself); he describes a general feeling of loss of values and respect in society. This, combined with 'poverty, inequality, abuse', mean that 'it is a frightening time for older people'. His motivation is rooted in a wish to change things for poorer older people, a position that has strengthened as he has done more with the forum. For others, the time freed up by retiring from formal employment also became a catalyst for latent activism to come to the surface.

However, there is not necessarily a straightforward relationship between perceptions of injustice and deciding to do anything about it. As one woman involved in the Meridian Forum put it, in relation to an early sense of injustice: '... inside there was a campaign going on but I didn't do anything about it'. Over time, particular incidents, education and exposure to politics all combined to make her the active forum member that she is now. Nor do even the most 'active' forum members have a strong 'political' life trajectory in any straightforward sense. People tend to distance themselves from formal politics, or to talk with pride about their rather maverick political history: 'I have been a member of the Conservative Association and I have been a member of the Liberals. I belonged to a long-haired poetry group when I was younger and I was also a communist' (woman, 75, L).

The more active women were quite explicit about the gender dimension to injustice. For example, one woman spoke about the origins of her long-standing tendency to speak out at perceived injustices as rooted in a combination of experiences at school and home:

I left at 15. I was asked to leave – I was somewhat vocal at school. I used to think I would stand up for people's rights. I hated it when children ... other girls or people got picked on...

(Did your sense of justice come from your parents?)

From my father, not my mother. My mum never stood up for herself, never. ... my mum used to do an injustice to herself I think, my mum waiting with my dad's slippers in front of the fire and then sometimes put them on his feet. (woman, 58, N)

Another woman also sees her motivation as associated with how her mother was treated:

Yes, it is injustice really, yes and I, it is possibly because of my, the way my father treated my mother it is this feeling I need to support women to be their own person. Not necessarily to come out and be militant and burn their bras and that sort of stuff but just to learn that they actually are as good as anybody. (woman, 75, L)

So participants may have personal experiences that prompt action to address injustice. However, there is a persistent view that, even when people are active committee members of forums, this has a somewhat 'accidental' quality. In fact, all of those who had formal positions tended to talk down how they came to be in these positions, and even to be slightly apologetic about their roles, suggesting that this was not a result of strong personal motivation to take on a leadership, advocacy or strongly representational role. We could speculate that this in turn might be linked to their sensitivity about the extent to which they are legitimate representatives of others. For example, one committee member describes how he was invited as a result of having a high profile in other areas of public life. Another describes his involvement as the result of his general competence on other committees—that he was invited because of his 'ability to do the job'. A woman committee member describes herself as a 'reluctant participant'. Another says that she took on a position of responsibility 'against my better nature'. A third woman tells us that she just went along to a meeting as a result of a mild interest and found herself 'staying with it'.

### Engagement and place

The first phase of work with the Meridian Forum had suggested the significance of place in relation to participation, and we then deliberately sought to explore possible differences associated with the very different nature of Lewes as a social and cultural context of older peoples' involvement. Our additional interviews lead us to some suggestions about the contrast between the two places. First, although Lewes respondents *are* engaged with the particular needs of the older people living in the town, their descriptions of motivating issues are generally much broader than those from Newhaven; they have a more 'global' and also in some senses more intellectual, perspective. Second, and possibly linked to this, while in both places, forum members were broadly 'middle class', in Lewes several respondents were educated to doctoral level, and had had high-level—and in some cases international—careers. This was not the case for any of the Newhaven respondents. One of our informants suggested that in Lewes, people are 'fancy middle class' as opposed to 'ordinary middle class'.

Most Lewes informants express a firm affection for the place, particularly celebrating its individual and 'stroppy' character.

When we first moved to Lewes in 1974 it was a sleepy town but over the years I've found that Lewes has changed. People of middle-class background and half the university seems to live where I live and this has caused a marked shift in the kind of people that live in Lewes and that means that it has become an intensely interesting place to live in and we have such wonderful little institutions. (man, 70, L)

This is again a personal thing, but I love the people in Lewes. They're really actually a little bit of a revolutionary. (man, 72, L)

The issues confronting older people in Lewes, particularly those associated with transport and health, certainly are a concern for some informants, particularly those with knowledge of the less affluent areas of the town. For example, one of the major achievements, noted by several people, was the fact that the start time for free bus passes was brought back from 9.30 to 9.00, in line with the rest of the country. Transport was identified as a key issue in ensuring older people were not excluded from the places in which they lived and lobbying for this was something with which several forums were involved. For many people, however, the forum is seen as more a potential source of information and perhaps social engagement than as a force for effecting change. In addition, this local engagement is generally in the context of a wider international perspective. All of our Lewes interviewees have lived outside the UK at some point in their lives and two were not born in the UK, but came to study and stayed. Perhaps as a result of this, one man describes himself as a 'world citizen', another told us that 'I'm still much more interested in big international issues'.

In contrast, our Newhaven informants are much more engaged with specific issues affecting the town, and concerned to campaign in relation to these generally, and how they influence older people in particular. Although within the wider Meridian sample, there are a few people who have lived outside the UK, most are strongly rooted in the town and primarily direct their energies to local campaigning on issues that are not 'older people specific', but which evidenced a strong sense of collective identity with the place they regard as home. As we noted, much of this is rooted in a sense that the town has suffered from a combination of neglect by policy makers and the vagaries of social and economic change, but it is also bolstered by a deep-seated affection and loyalty for Newhaven and a wish to change it for the better. One person sums this up well:

I always seemed to be in on something. Newhaven is quite a unique town. There are about two dozen people who are always in on something. There was the campaign to keep Hillcrest [community centre] open. We were always campaigning ... about housing being built in the wrong place ... about the ring road being built round the

town, cutting it off and is part of its downfall, obviously against the incinerator. All specific to where you live and aware of the impact on the community. (woman, 70, N)

When it comes to older people too, committee members are primarily concerned to make a difference to the lives of older people in the Meridian area, whether in terms of health-care provision, access to transport, day-care provision, or providing support to those who are less able to get out of the house. They also stress their ability to do this precisely because of their 'localness'. Interestingly, the one Newhaven committee member we spoke to who does not have this perspective also has other characteristics in common with several of the Lewes respondents; an academic, having lived and worked abroad, and a self-confessed 'intellectual snob', she suggests that the problem with the forum is the 'parochialism' of the old; 'they can only see their own problems and their own needs and so on' (woman, 90, N).

## Discussion

Current social policy across the globe prioritises 'active ageing' (Walker 2009) and includes within this the encouragement of participatory citizenship, understood to encompass both traditional voluntary activity and engagement with public governance. Whilst the results of this study tend to reinforce a view of older 'activists' as predominantly well endowed with social and cultural capital, they are by no means a homogeneous group and do not see their involvement solely (or even primarily) as a route to maximising benefit for 'people like them', *i.e.* as a means of pursuing self-interest. Indeed, what is perhaps more evident from these interviews is a sense that 'active' older people should apply their 'activism' to benefit those perceived as not capable of activity on their own behalf. These assumptions that illness, frailty or the need to make substantial use of social-care services are associated with unwillingness or inability to have a voice of their own have been found in other studies of active senior citizens' group (Barnes 2005). But the findings of this study suggest that membership of forums that imply 'activity' amongst older people serves a particular purpose of sustaining members' self-perceptions as engaged, aware and self-efficacious, in contrast to those who have 'given up' and thus can truly be considered old. Rather than evidence of the development of a collective identity amongst older people, our findings imply that such forums may reinforce a fault line between active and non-active older people. In line with Gunnarsson's (2009) study of older people in Sweden not in need of social-care services, membership of the forums can be considered a new way of keeping going, and a means of challenging the association between age, frailty and dependency. This perspective resonates with a study by Townsend, Godfrey

and Denby (2006), which suggests that older people's perceptions of 'others' are strongly related to their own self-identity and management of the ageing process.

Whilst the assumptions and distancing that underpin the way in which forum members see their potential role in relation to other older people can be challenged with evidence that frail older people are quite capable of speaking on their own behalf given appropriate models of engagement (Barnes and Bennet 1998), it should give pause to those who see a key problem of the 'usual suspects' as being that participatory processes inevitably prioritise the self-interests of participants. Rather, those members who had taken on leadership roles within the forums were aware of, concerned about and seeking ways of using the opportunities created by the forums to ensure that those not present within the forums might be represented through them.

In these responses we can see evidence of many of the 'commitments' and motivations identified elsewhere as factors influencing participation, including commitments relating to place. But we also get a sense of factors that are specific to life-stage and suggest the need to understand older people's motivations to get involved in rather different ways from those of younger participants. For some, participation in later life is a continuation of lifelong activism or an expression of an enduring engagement with issues of public policy. Thus, it is a means of sustaining some public presence and identity following retirement by applying experience, skills and values to a range of contemporary issues. For others this type of action is a new dimension to their lives – a consequence of greater time availability to get involved and hence the opportunity to explore aspects of themselves that were previously under-explored – because of work or family commitments, for example. One woman in particular spoke of feeling less inhibited in being outspoken at this stage in her life. Whilst participation may be prompted by specific experiences of disadvantage or discrimination associated with ageing that generate an 'oppositional consciousness' (Mansbridge and Morris 2001), the participants in our research rarely identified such experiences, though did suggest that they may become more aware of others having such experiences through being involved in the forums. Barnes *et al.* (2006) have emphasised the role that participation processes have to play in generating different consciousness and understanding – *i.e.* that they should be understood as constitutive of identity and not simply spaces through which previously determined identities can be represented. Our research took place when the forums were still in the early stages of their development; whether they reinforce the distinctions between different 'types' of older people referred to above, or provide a space within which greater solidarity may be forged is still an open question.



The development of new friendships may be particularly important as family move away and old friends die. A community of place which can be a source of social support is an important factor in terms of quality of life (Walters and Bartlett 2009). Participation may be a means of building or sustaining social contact following moves prompted by changing circumstances in older age, and while this social function may outweigh any explicit political or value-based motivation for getting involved, the process of participation is starting to impact on local environments with the potential to enhance their 'age-friendliness'. And, for at least some of our interviewees, the choice of place to move to was linked to a perception that this would be sympathetic to public as well as personal values. Thus place, friendship and participation are interconnected in motivations to take part. Place is no less significant for many of those who are long-term if not lifelong residents of the area, but its meaning in terms of their motivations to get involved are very different. In this context it is less about forging new friendships within a particular place, but of seeking both to maximise the quality of the environment in which people are growing old, and to sustain and perhaps develop their own satisfaction/quality of life through the process of engaging more actively with their environment.

Based on a review of research literature, Gilleard and Higgs (2005) suggest that neighbourhoods have become much less salient in the lives of both young and old. They present a dichotomy between, on the one hand, those who are compelled to 'age in place' (2005: 128), suffering increasing isolation and disengagement, and, on the other hand, those for whom geographical mobility presents new opportunities for engagement and the exercise of personal agency. They indicate that class may play a major role in determining these outcomes. Phillipson (2007: 336) similarly argues that one dimension of the inequality experienced by older people is precisely whether or not older people are able to 'actively re-shape communities that are meaningful to them in old age'. Our research indicates ways in which these factors intersect with personal biographies in influencing both whether older people get involved in seniors' forums and how they do so. There is a difference between those who see their old age as a time in which they can become more embedded in their local area by working to improve local conditions for themselves and others, and those whose commitment are more cerebral and less personally or spatially determined.

## Conclusion

In this article we have sought to contribute to a growing body of work through exploring the significance of place in the context of other factors

that affect older peoples' participation in public governance. This study was based in one part of England and highlights the importance of distinct local cultures in understanding the nature and meaning of participation. But such participation is a feature of developments in widely differing socio-cultural locations in different countries (Charpentier, Kornfeld and Perez-Salanova 2010; Thursz, Nusberg and Prather 1995). In the UK older people's forums are increasingly part of the landscape of participatory governance and their significance is in part a reflection of older people's membership of place-based communities, rather than their identities as consumers of health or welfare services. Our work tends to reinforce a view that place-based participation primarily engages not only fitter older people, but also those with more social and cultural capital, suggesting that more focused work remains necessary to ensure a voice for more isolated or excluded older people. However, it also suggests that such forums create a space within which older participants can explore the diverse meanings and experiences of ageing and what this implies for the roles of such forums in relation to older people in general. Conflicting tendencies are evident: to create distance from 'other' less-active older people, but also to develop solidarity across lines of difference amongst older people; to focus on 'age-specific' issues and also to emphasise cross-generational interests in creating environments in which people can age well. The way in which such issues are explored also reflects particular local cultures. To dismiss such forums as places in which the usual suspects promote their own interests does not do justice to the emergence of 'spaces for change' (Cornwall and Schattan Coelho 2007) in which older people are contributing to the development of collective commitments to improve public decision making.

## References

- Barnes, M. 2005. Same old process? Older people, participation and deliberation. *Ageing & Society*, 25, 2, 245–59.
- Barnes, M. and Bennet, G. 1998. Frail bodies, courageous voices: older people influencing community care. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 6, 2, 102–11.
- Barnes, M., Newman, J., Knops, A. and Sullivan, H. 2003. Constituting the public for public participation. *Public Administration*, 81, 2, 379–99.
- Barnes, M., Newman, J. and Sullivan, H. 2006. Discursive arenas: deliberation and the constitution of identity in public participation at a local level. *Social Movement Studies*, 5, 3, 193–207.
- Barnes, M., Newman, J. and Sullivan, H. 2007. *Power, Participation and Political Renewal: case studies in public participation*. The Policy Press, Bristol.
- Barnes, M. and Shaw, S. 2000. Older people, citizenship and collective action. In Warnes, T., Warren, L. and Nolan, M. (eds), *Care Services in Later Life*. Jessica Kingsley, London, 135–51.

- Barnes, M., Skelcher, C., Dalziel, R. and Beirens, H. 2008. *Designing Citizen Centred Governance*. JRF, York, UK. Available online at <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/designing-citizen-centred-governance> [Accessed 10 March 2011].
- Biggs, S. and Tinker, A. 2007. *What makes a city age-friendly? London's contribution to the World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities Project*. London, Help the Aged.
- Broese van Groenou, M. and Deeg, D.J.H. 2010. Formal and informal social participation of the 'young-old' in The Netherlands in 1992 and 2002. *Ageing & Society*, **30**, 445–65.
- Charpentier, M., Kornfeld, R. and Perez-Salanova, M. 2010. Ageing and empowerment: from research to action. Paper presented at the 3rd International Congress: Older People, Citizenship and Empowerment, 26–27 October, Santiago de Chile.
- Cornwall, A. and Schattan Coelho, V. (eds) 2007. *Spaces for Change*. Zed Books, London.
- Cresswell, T. 1996. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Dryzek, J. 2000. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Gilleard, C. and Higgs, P. 2005. *Contexts of Ageing: Class, Context and Community*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Gould, N. 2007. *50+ Citizen Engagement Project. Research Review. Barriers to Engagement: From Understanding to Action*. Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care, University of Glamorgan, UK.
- Gunnarsson, E. 2009. 'I think I have had a good life': the everyday lives of older women and men from a lifecourse perspective. *Ageing & Society*, **29**, 33–48.
- Lovell, N. (ed.) 1998. *Locality and Belonging*. Routledge, London.
- Low, S. and Lawrence-Zuniga, D. 2006. *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.
- Mansbridge, J. and Morris, A. (eds) 2001. *Oppositional Consciousness. The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*. Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- Massey, D. 1994. *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Melucci, A. 1996. *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Miller, R. L. 2000. *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*. Sage, London.
- Mowl, G., Pain, R. and Talbot, C. 2000. The ageing body and the homespace. *Area*, **32**, 2, 189–97.
- Pain, R. and Kindon, S. 2007. Guest editorial. Participatory geographies. *Environment and Planning A*, **39**, 2807–12.
- Pattie, C., Seyd, P. and Whiteley, P. 2004. *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Petriwskyj, A. and Warburton, J. 2007. Motivations and barriers to volunteering by seniors: a review of the literature. *The International Journal of Volunteer Administration*, **24**, 6, 3–25.
- Phillips, A. 1995. *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Phillipson, C. 2007. The 'elected' and the 'excluded': sociological perspectives on the experience of place and community in old age. *Ageing & Society*, **27**, 321–42.
- Rapport, N. and Dawson, A. (eds) 1998. *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement*. Berg, Oxford.
- Sibley, D. 1981. *Outsiders in Urban Societies*. St Martins Press, New York.
- Thursz, D., Nusberg, C. and Prather, J. (eds) 1995. *Empowering Older People. An International Approach*. Cassell, London.

- Townsend, J., Godfrey, M. and Denby, T. 2006. Heroines, villains and victims: older people's perceptions of others. *Ageing & Society*, **26**, 6, 883–900.
- Walker, A. 2009. Commentary: the emergence and application of active aging in Europe. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, **21**, 1, 75–93.
- Walters, P. and Bartlett, H. 2009. Growing old in a new estate: establishing new social networks in retirement. *Ageing & Society*, **29**, 217–36.
- Warburton, J. and Petriwskyj, A. 2007. Who speaks for Australia's seniors? Policy partnerships and older Australians. *Just Policy*, **45**, 38–43.

*Accepted 13 March 2011; first published online 8 April 2011*

*Address for correspondence:*

Marian Barnes, School of Applied Social Science,  
University of Brighton, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9PH, UK.

E-mail: [Marian.Barnes@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:Marian.Barnes@brighton.ac.uk)