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Flocking Together: Bridging and Bonding Ties in Retirement Migration

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Introduction

Retirement migration has become an increasingly integral part of retirement in America. Unlike previous generations, who were poor and often cared for in institutions, the young-old (aged 60-75) are young, mobile, and the wealthiest age cohort in America (Wolf and Longino, 2005). They are also participating in greater and greater numbers in a new institution: retirement migration, the seasonal flow of retirees from states with harsh winters in the Northeast and Midwest to second homes in the so-called Sunbelt states that extend across the southern United States from Florida to California. There has been a great deal of competition at the state and county level to attract “young-old” migrants, (who are perceived to have a great deal of discretionary income to invest in these states) including higher public welfare spending, lowering or eliminating “death” taxes (Graff and Wiseman 1990) and zoning land exclusively for occupation by those over 60 (Doyle 1977). This has resulted in the concentration of many snowbirds in age-segregated developments in the suburbs of large Sunbelt cities like Phoenix and St. Petersburg.

While lucrative, this seasonal migration has caused a great deal of tension in communities that receive large numbers of snowbird migrants. Retirement migrants are viewed as uninterested in the welfare of the full-time, non-retired population and as not contributing their “fair share,” despite tangible economic contributions of retirement migration development. Full-time residents of many communities that have allowed large-scale retirement development often feel that retirees reap the benefits of local

infrastructure and services without “giving back” as much as full-time residents, a feeling that is amplified both by the fact that retirees seldom interact with the non-retired community, and that retirees often pay fewer taxes than full-time residents (McHugh and Mings 1996; Rowles and Watkins 1993). Previous literature on the interactions between snowbirds and non-retired full-time residents suggested that tension is a matter of economic class exacerbated by the creation of a service economy catering to retirees, yet this alone does not seem to fully explain the lack of interaction between snowbirds and non-retired residents of their winter communities.

I conducted nine focused interviews of snowbirds who migrate seasonally from Minnesota to communities with large numbers of seasonal retirees in Florida and Arizona, asking them about their social life, friendships, and community activities in both locations and found that the factor that had the most impact on both the maintenance and creation of social ties was not class or previous community involvement but in what type of development their winter home was located. While all the participants migrate to communities with large numbers of retirees, the larger and more age segregated the development, the less likely a snowbird is to establish either bridging or bonding ties at either end of their migration, and the more likely they are to lose previously existing bridging ties. In contrast, the smaller and more age-diverse the community was, the more likely the participant to create new bridging and bonding ties. My research question shifted from one concerning the dynamics of social class between working and retired residents and become instead: why are snowbirds with extended social networks and numerous bridging and bonding ties in their home states establishing few or no significant new bonds in their winter communities?

My research shows that the tension and lack of bridging and bonding capital between full-time residents and part-time retirees is not inevitable, and it is also part of a larger lack of bonding between snowbirds themselves, which seems to indicate that economic class alone is not the determining factor in why snowbirds create fewer bonds in their winter communities. The smaller and less age segregated the community a snowbird settled in, the more bonding and bridging ties they formed, both with other snowbirds and full-time, working residents. In other words, the major factor in the development of new social ties, both bridging and bonding, seems to be not class and economic activity but the size and type of development where the respondent's second home was located.

To explain this phenomenon, I use Putnam's theory of the effects of urban sprawl on bridging and bonding capital (2000). Although Putnam views urban sprawl as a secondary factor in the loss of social capital in modern American society, (he views it as a secondary factor in the loss of social capital rather than a primary reason), I use his three factors of the negative effects of urban sprawl on social bonds (time, homogeneity, and the lack of community boundedness) as a lens to view the effects of retirement migration on social bonding. In this paper, I examine the previous research on the rise of retirement and age segregation, the public policy issues and community tensions surrounding snowbird migration, as well as Putnam's explanation of urban sprawl on social ties, and compare them to the experiences that study participants reported concerning social ties and retirement migration.

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

Previous study of retirement migration has focused largely on the demographic and economic issues of age segregation in the United States. Demographic research includes the new classification of the “young-old” and the “old-old,” tracking and recording migration patterns to certain counties in Sunbelt states, and the economic impact of large numbers of retirees on host communities, especially those in rural areas (Rowles and Watkins, 1993). However, there has been little research on the actual social impacts of retirement migration and age segregation. There has been little direct research on the subject of the bonding between young-old retirees in retirement developments. Although some research has hinted at the lack of new bonds formed in young-old retirement communities, it has not been linked to the lack of bonding with working-aged people, as that relationship has been defined as economic (McHugh and Mings 1996).

Although Putnam’s primary focus is on social ties among adults who are still active in the workforce, I argue that the discussion of the effects of urban sprawl on civic engagement actually helps provide a clearer understanding of how snowbirds form and maintain bonds. Putnam contributes a crucial point not addressed directly by previous research concerning snowbird migration: the way in which a region is developed has widespread economic and structural impact, but also has a profound impact on personal relationships and social ties.

Spatial Separation and Age Segregation

Age segregation in America began in the nineteenth century with the rise of retirement. The rise of “rationalized” industrial working conditions, which favored ability to perform repetitive tasks over accumulated knowledge led to a new view of aging not as an accumulation of life experiences but a slow and steady attrition of their abilities (Atchley 1982). In these cases, retirement was often forced and did not include a pension plan, making the elderly the poorest age cohort in America by the turn of the twentieth century. Industrialization was also the beginning of the segregation of American society by age, and as increasing numbers of elderly were no longer seen as a producing asset to a family but rather an expensive burden, they were no longer cared for by their children within the home, but in almshouses and charitable homes (Laws 1993).

The trend accelerated with the suburbanization of American cities, as young families moved outward to communities and homes designed for single, nuclear families and child rearing and the elderly were often left behind in subsidized housing or institutions in the cities. Beginning in the 1960s, however, retirees, who had gained pensions and had been able to save for their retirement, began to view retirement not as an imposition but as an expectation, and retirees were crowned “the new leisure class” (Atchley, 1982). But as retirement can stretch for twenty years or more, scholars of old age have recognized the need to change the perception of the life cycle and to split what was once a single cohort (the elderly) into two new cohorts, the “young-old” and the “old-old” (Neugarten, 1974).

It is the young-old, ranging from 60 to 75 that makes up the “leisure class” and engages in seasonal amenity or leisure migration (Neugarten 1974). Amenity migration (migration to certain regions for their climates, etc) is usually inter-regional, with “snowbird” retirees moving from the Northeast and Midwest to the “sunbelt states” of North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California seeking warm winter weather to pursue outdoor hobbies or interests (Chevan and Fisher 1979). They are generally relatively affluent, healthy, educated beyond high school and are likely to have at least one living parent and a living spouse (Neugarten 1974). In contrast, the old-old are more likely to be female, widowed and experiencing health problems, as well as more likely to be institutionalized in a long-term care facility (Neugarten 1974).

The trend of interstate migration has increased age segregation tremendously. Unlike the old-old, young-old amenity migrants are also more likely to live, at least part of the year, far from both their children and surviving parents (Rogerson, Weng, and Lin 1993), and the young-old have become not only the wealthiest but also the most mobile age cohort in America (Wolf and Longino 2005). At the same time that many amenity migrants are moving increasingly far from their families, they are also moving increasingly to age-segregated retirement developments (Blakely and Snyder 1997). Several studies have discussed the social impacts of this influx on host communities through the lens of economic impact and the increased socioeconomic stratification brought about by snowbird-oriented development.

Development and Economic Impact of Snowbirds

Although studies of retirement development laud the positive effects of retirees spending on local economies (Meyer and Speare 1985), snowbirds and retirees in general are frequently viewed as outsiders, who do not contribute “fairly” to the community, in terms of both taxes and community involvement (McHugh and Mings 1996; Rowles and Watkins 1993). Retirees are seen as reluctant to contribute to “young” issues like school taxes (many large retirement developments are indeed incorporated as separate cities to avoid paying these taxes) but eager to fund infrastructure they require, like hospitals and clinics specializing in geriatric medicine (Buczko 1994; Laws 1993).

Many working-age residents in these communities are being “priced out” of the housing market by wealthier retirees (Rowles and Watkins 1993). There are also concerns that possible impacts of relying on retirement as a community development strategy may lead to a lack of industrial development and a “dual economy,” in which there are large numbers of low-paying service jobs caring for the elderly, a few high-paying professional jobs and nothing in between, widening socio-economic inequalities in these regions (Rowles and Watkins 1993). While the divide between retirees and non-retirees has been viewed through economic transactions (such as paying taxes, buying houses, etc), it hints at a social divide between retirees and the non-retired that stems from a lack of involvement outside the realm of economic transactions. Again, the research that presents class as the determining factor in the lack of bonding between the retired and non-retired does not consider bonding between snowbirds either, although there are studies of the relationships between residents of managed care facilities (Laws

1993). Just as in the rise in age segregation and retirement practices in the early twentieth century, the social division between retired and working-aged people is depicted as being largely economically determined, and not an effect of social structures such as urban sprawl.

Urban Sprawl and Civic Disengagement

The symptoms described by previous research on snowbirds closely mirror Putnam's description of the effects of urban sprawl on community involvement, but the reasoning behind it is very different (Putnam 2000). While social theorists have often argued that American civic engagement has been on the decline due to increased spatial mobility (linked to labor migration) among Americans, numerous studies have shown that spatial mobility is actually declining in the United States with the exception of the young-old and retirement migration (Wolf and Longino 2005). However, there is a marked increase in urban sprawl and commuting. Looking at the increasing number of suburban commuters, Putnam argues that the strength and abundance of social ties an individual has is closely linked with what kind of community they live in. Small towns are the most conducive to forming strong ties, while large suburbs are the least conducive. This is because unlike small towns or cities, which support large amounts of diversity, particularly in terms of class, "suburbs are collectively heterogeneous, but individually homogenous (Putnam 2000; 209)." That is to say, suburbs are being increasingly segregated not only in terms of race and class but also by personal "lifestyle preferences." Prospective residents are not drawn only to the physical location but also to the "lifestyle choices" the community offers them (Blakely and Snyder 1997). This

idea of a "leisure lifestyle" that can be found in the suburbs is also the way in which large-scale retirement developments are organized and marketed (Blakely and Snyder 1997).

While Putnam does not discuss age segregation, the retirement developments many snowbirds move to are very similar to the typical suburban development, but their effect on local communities has been heightened because many of these developments are located in underdeveloped areas (Watkins 1993). The rise of suburban sprawl has weakened local social ties in three ways: through time, self-segregation and homogeneity, and the lack of "community boundedness" (Putnam 2000: 215).

The large-scale retirement developments that roughly half of study respondents live in exemplify these trends. In Putnam's theory, time refers to the fact that "sprawl takes time. More time spent alone in a car means less time for friends and neighbors." Sprawl also facilitates social segregation and homogeneity, and while one might think that homogeneity would increase neighborliness and community involvement because residents would feel comfortable with each other, the connections an individual may derive from that homogeneity actually had the opposite effect. While neighbors may hold the same ideals and opinions as each other, their similarities ensure that they will most likely never discuss them because there is little reason to. The lack of conflict of interests and opinions eliminates much of the traditional public arena, which relies on conflict to draw citizens into discussion (Putnam 2000: 221). The third, and perhaps most powerful influence of urban sprawl in Putnam's opinion is the lack of "community boundedness."

Boundedness refers to how dense the social ties in a neighborhood are, and a lack of community boundedness means that individuals in the community have more ties with those outside the community than within it. Lack of community boundedness affects the formation of both bridging and bonding capital. Bonding, or exclusive ties, reinforce “exclusive identities and homogenous groups (Putnam 2000; 22),” or in other words, bonding with those like us. Bonding ties can be important to maintaining an individual’s personal self-worth, but it is bridging ties that can be the most important to a community. Bridging ties are inclusive across lines of class and status, and are key for information sharing. The importance information sharing has been discussed most famously in Granovetter’s studies of weak ties and their importance in securing job contacts, but information sharing also spreads awareness of community events, new laws and regulations, and business and personal opportunities (1974).

Snowbirds, like suburban commuters, spend large amounts of time in transit between their “home” and snowbird communities (although not on a daily basis). Putnam argues that before the invention of the car and the commute, an individual’s strongest social ties would be to their neighbors and those family and friends who lived close by. As the distance between home, extended family, and work increased, more social ties are formed outside the community where an individual lives. As Blakely and Snyder state in their discussion of gated communities, “People meet through other means...the home is just an address (1997; 71).”

Putnam's theory offers a way to explain the lack of social ties between snowbirds and both people within their communities and with non-retired "hosts." The fact that their time is split between two locations (first and second homes) leaves snowbirds reluctant to invest time and effort into relationships in what they often described as a "temporary" setting. Homogeneity of race, class, and age, is also a hallmark of many retirement communities, which are often legally zoned so that every resident must be over 55. Thirdly, the lack of community boundedness among snowbirds in large retirement developments is shown through the fact that their closest bonds within the community were actually formed outside of it, with close friends and family in Minnesota. These long-term friendships, often dating back to participant's college years, also seem to exacerbate the lack of new bonding in winter communities, as the presence strong bonds reduces the need for new ones.

Methods

In contrast to previous research on retirement, which tends toward large-scale surveys focusing on economic impacts of retirement migration, my analysis will focus on the developments of social ties. To determine the status of the elderly and their impact in local communities, I conducted in-depth, focused interviews with retirees who migrate to a second home for three or more months of the year. The alumni office of a small local college sent message to all of their graduates between 65 and 75 years of age with an email address asking if they would be interested in participating in a student's study concerning retirement. The sample began as purposive, as I targeted a specific population that I believe to be representative of the young-old (educated, well-off, individuals who live in a region that encourages seasonal migration due to its harsh

winter weather), but it is also a “snowball” sample as several early participants referred me to friends and family who are also snowbirds. I conducted hour long focused interviews of nine subjects, five of whom responded directly to the email sent out by the alumni organization and four of whom were referred by their friends and family.

All face-to-face interviews were taped and then transcribed, while phone interviews were transcribed in shorthand due to technical difficulties when trying to record interviews over the phone. Once the interviews were transcribed, all names of people, places and organizations were given pseudonyms to further ensure confidentiality.

Study Population and Units of Analysis

The study population consisted of five women and four men, ranging in age from 62 to 78. All were white, college-educated, and were either married or recently widowed and had been “snowbirding” for five to fifteen years. All nine interviewees migrate seasonally between at least two residences, staying between 3-8 months in a Sunbelt state and the remaining time in the Midwest (two subjects also own summer cabins in Wisconsin). All had the basic defining traits of the “young-old” laid out in previous literature, being between the close to the age range of sixty-five and seventy-five, married or widowed, having at least an undergraduate education, healthy and mobile for their age, and having at least one living parent or sibling (Neugarten 1974). All nine had at least one child, and one remarried woman had nine children or stepchildren. While two subjects had chronic health problems (arthritis and hearing loss) and one had recently been hospitalized, none required managed care or anticipated requiring managed care in

the next five years, and planned on continuing migrating until health problems prevented them.

Five out of nine interviewees had winter homes in planned age-segregated suburban communities of 10,000 or more outside of major metropolitan areas in Arizona (four out of five were retirement communities), while two had homes in non segregated but predominantly retiree occupied permanent trailer parks of a few hundred residents in Arizona, one lived in a gated leisure community of “mixed” ages on the Florida coast, and one had a home on a barrier island off the Florida coast with a population divided evenly between full-time non-retired residents and seasonal snowbirds. All participants live the majority of the year in the Midwest and were residents of Minnesota or Wisconsin, with the exception of a former financial planner, who opts to live more than six months of the year in Florida for the tax breaks it affords him.

Because roughly half of the participants migrate to large suburban retirement developments and half to smaller mixed-age developments, they offer an interesting case study of Putnam’s theory of urban sprawl and its affect on bridging and bonding capital. By examining two different types of community, the factors affecting the maintenance and creation of social ties in snowbirds become more apparent.

Interview Questions

Interview questions were designed to examine the ways in which snowbirds maintained and created social ties and the impediments to those ties. The interview was

ordered with the most basic, general knowledge questions asked first in order to establish a comfortable space for the subject, and to develop a rapport between the subject and myself as an interviewer. While they changed slightly from subject to subject, depending on how the subjects answered and what previous interviews had uncovered, the questions I asked each participant were:

How old are you?
 Are you married?
 When did you become a “snowbird?”
 How much time do you spend in Minnesota or Wisconsin?
 How much time do you spend at your second home?
 How long have you been retired?
 Is your first or second home located in a planned development for retirees?
 How did you find out about the community you chose for your second home?
 Why did you choose this specific community?
 What kind of activities do you enjoy at your second home?
 Have you made many friends near your second home?
 Do you travel frequently?
 Are you involved in any social organizations, such as your church, a volunteer organization, a book club, etc?
 Do you know your neighbors well?
 Do you have many close friends who live nearby?
 Do you have any family close by?
 Do your friends and family often visit? Do you often visit them?
 How often do you leave your neighborhood?
 If you live in a metropolitan area, how often do you go into the city?
 How often do you see or interact with non-retired people?
 Do you see yourself choosing to stop migrating any time soon? Why

Strengths and Limitations

By conducting interviews instead of sending out a survey, I hoped to gain a more nuanced understanding of retirees’ relationships with the broader communities in their home states and their retirement state or states. While there has been a large amount of qualitative research done on the demographic and economic impact of migrant retirees, there has been relatively little done on the social impacts of their migration. Working

with a limited amount of time, resources, and previous research on this aspect of retirement migration meant I had to limit the size of my sample. As for the choice of interview based research, I believe that because the bulk of research on retirement migration is largely ten to fifteen years old, interviews allowed subjects to speak for themselves as to how they live everyday life in their communities.

By interviewing a smaller population more intensely, the nuances of daily interactions became clearer. A variety of migration experiences emerged even from this small sample, but common themes emerged as well. While no generalizations can be made about retirees as a whole from this small study, it may expose themes and relations that larger surveys intent on answering the question of why and how retirees migrate, have missed concerning what happens in local communities once they arrive. Interviews give the subjects a chance to raise issues they have noticed about retirement researchers have not yet focused on. While this small study may not give a comprehensive overview of these issues across a wide enough population to draw a general conclusion, it could clarify trends and suggest and inspire directions for future research.

Findings

Although Putnam's theory was originally applied to "bedroom communities" and nuclear families consisting of steadily employed suburban commuters, it is also certainly applicable to the formation of social ties among the snowbird population. While they are unemployed in the formal economy and do not often live with either their children or parents, snowbirds follow many of the same patterns as suburban commuters. Their yearly journey from the Midwest to the Sunbelt can be understood, in a way, as simply a very long commute. I found that the three factors of time, homogeneity, and community

boundedness had a noticeable impact on the formation of both bridging and bonding ties among snowbirds living in large retirement developments, making them less likely to know either their neighbors or non-retired community members. In contrast, study participants who lived in smaller, more economically and socially diverse communities reported gaining new friendships, knowing their neighbors, and having more working friends and acquaintances, perhaps because their communities were both smaller and more diverse in terms of age and class.

General Trends in Bonding Ties

Social Segregation and Homogeneity. Putnam's discussion of homogeneity is especially applicable to the experiences of the four study participants who lived in large (over 10,000 people), age segregated retirement developments, all of whom reported having few or no close friends in their winter communities whom they met after buying a home there. Carl, who lives in a large retirement community outside of Phoenix, explains the desire to live in an age-segregated retirement community this way:

When you are done with your working career, at least for men, [you] feel like "I've put my time in, I've made enough to do what I want." I want to be fit and travel locally and internationally and nationally, and I have a tendency to share that with people with similar interests. You're drawn to people with similar interests, [and] instead of living in a place where you gotta drive for that, to see your friends who are like you, in a senior community everybody has similar interests. My next-door neighbor builds rockets and fires them out in the desert, you know. People here are intelligent, well educated and they *do* things and aren't waiting at home sipping tea. And you don't have to deal with parents and the kid lifestyle. There's not a lot of argument about things like noise or anything.

In communities like Carl's, "neighbors may not know each other, but they can still expect anyone they come in contact with to be "one of them" (Blakely and Snyder 1997: 71)." This sense of sameness is reassuring to Carl, who feels that because everyone in the retirement community shares his same interests, it is easier and less-time consuming for him to pursue them. He also said that the weather and the fact that a good friend who shares his interest in dirt biking lived nearby let him pursue the activities he wanted to at any time. This supports research that "these developments are intentionally homogenous to reflect the choices of the occupiers for people and place" (Blakely and Snyder 1997: 49). Carl's belief that his neighbors are like him makes it unnecessary for him to actually get to know them, discouraging the creation of bonding ties. This is not to say that Carl and others in large developments did not have close friends or strong bonds in their winter communities. His best friend from Minnesota lived just half a mile away, and they spent most of their time together. Like Carl, other study participants simply knew the majority of their close friends there before they actually moved to the community through the process of chain migration, a phenomena which is not discussed in previous literature concerning either migrant retirees or urban sprawl.

Chain Migration and Pre-existing Friendships. While all the interviewees expressed appreciation for the warm climates of Arizona or Florida, seven out of nine subjects also said they were inspired to move to their specific communities because they had visited a close friend, family member, or acquaintance within the community, and eight out of nine also said they had persuaded a close friend to move down to their retirement community either full or part time. This trend was universal and not affected by the size or diversity

of the winter community. For example, Valerie explains her and her husband's decision to migrate seasonally to a small trailer park near the Mexican border:

The first year we went, the fellow who owned it was up here at the state trap shoot, and this fella said, why don't you come down, and Dan [my husband] said, "oh, we don't have a camper." And he said, "well, I've got an extra one, you should come down and see how you like it." So we went down and stayed for a month in a little bitty trailer and we liked the camp. But we just said there is no way we could stay in this trailer for three months! Anyway, it was a fun experience, but then we ran into somebody who was going to sell his fifth wheel [trailer] and buy a motor home...they said they would park it for us, get it ready for us and all we had to do was come back and start living! So we jumped at it because it was perfect for us.

In Valerie's case, a long-term acquaintance convinced her and her husband to move down to the trailer park. Later, she and Dan convinced another couple they were "good friends with" to move down to the same trailer park for the winter. While most of the other respondents reported moving for a close friend or family member, Valerie and Dan still fit a general pattern of chain migration, aided by a social connection to the place.

Cathy, a housewife who lived part time in a large retirement development in Arizona with her husband until his death a year ago, was inspired to move down because of family:

We had family down there, who... were very happy...permanent residents. And we decided to become winter residents. My parents-in-law have died, they no longer live there, but my sister -in-law, [and] her husband live there...in the same development [as us].

While participants cited amenities, especially the climate, as a primary reason that they moved to a particular state, migration to specific communities was not based on amenities as indicated by previous research. Instead, it is based largely on social ties. Chain migration “can be described as that movement in which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged *by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants* (MacDonald, 82, 1964).” In other words, previous relationships matter just as much as the opportunities or amenities available in any specific community.

Like previous studies of chain migration among immigrant communities in the United States, snowbirds are drawn by bonding ties –relationships with close friends and family- to specific communities. Chain migration among snowbirds may help to exaggerate the effects of social homogeneity and limit the formation of new bridging ties between more diverse groups. In effect, there is little incentive to get to know your neighbors because you already have close friends there. It is also a perfect example of a lack of community boundedness because an individual’s social ties were formed outside of the community (Putnam 2000). As Lonny, who has become a resident of Florida and spends eight months of the year in a gated community said:

Well, sure, we have friends from all over down here. But as the saying goes, “one is silver and the other’s gold.” I have friends from Minnesota down here that I’ve known for thirty years, and that’s before you were born. And if they don’t live down here, I call or email ‘em almost everyday. It’s not that we didn’t make friends down here, but there’s not so much need when you have friends like that, where it doesn’t matter where you are, you can just pick up right where you left

off. I have some friends from Florida, we like to do the same things but we're not close like that.

Lonny also exposes the increasing role that relatively cheap communications and travel play in maintaining bonding ties that has not been discussed in previous literature. He can maintain ties over great distances and therefore has even less need to establish close local ties with his neighbors in his winter community. His comments were echoed by several of the study participants, although this population might not be indicative of the overall snowbird population. This is especially true as I contacted all participants through email, indicating that they

The fact that most of the study respondents arrived in their secondary communities with a social network of close bonds already in place is certainly one of the factors that limit new bonding and bridging ties. However, even a lack of close friends or family in the area did not necessarily encourage the formation of bonding ties. Karina spoke repeatedly of the void she felt in her life when she and her husband migrate down to Arizona each year. Both she and her husband golfed, and had chosen to purchase a "spec house" (one of the first houses completed in a suburban development) in a mixed-age, golf-oriented suburban development outside of Tucson. Before they encouraged another couple they knew in Minnesota to move down to a nearby community, they knew no one nearby.

We had a lot of guests come down last year, because we have a lot of golfing friends and we live near a very nice golf course, a real treat to play on. But this year I don't think we'll have so many guests, which makes me a little worried socially. [My husband] doesn't mind so much, he knew for sure he didn't want to

settle into one of those retirement communities where everything is planned for you. He likes his independence and his space. But I guess, because I'm the more social one, I feel a void in Arizona. We're really not down there enough that we have the "golf license plate" [Arizona residency]. Some of our friends do, and they make real investments in friendships down there. But I guess I just don't see the point. I love to entertain my friends from Minnesota who come down, but we can do that up here, and in fact we usually fly back and forth between Arizona and here several times in a winter, and spend a few weeks here and a few there. So, I just always enjoy coming back up here [in Minnesota] to family and friends.

Karina's reluctance to "make the investment" in new friendships is typical of the subjects who live in larger, planned subdivisions. Again, community boundedness seems to be an issue in her thinking. Because people are always arriving and leaving a short time later, and because they have no real long-standing ties to the area, they are reluctant to build and maintain new relationships beyond a superficial level, especially when they have close friends from "home" who live nearby.

In contrast, all of the study participants spoke of "investing" or "making an effort" when they were "home" in Minnesota during the summer to see friends and organize social events and visits. Janet talks about how busy her life becomes when she returns to Minnesota for the summer:

I love to entertain, which is a lot of why we added on to the house [here in Minnesota]. Now we have the deck and a hot tub and a trampoline for the grandkids when they come over. I'll have lots of events for the family, big gatherings and all. And whenever I'm home I try to see all my other friends who go to other places, you know. I'll probably have the bridge club over, and a group of ladies I know from [college]. When I'm back up here, I'll see them at least

twice a week, even if it's a drive because you know, we don't always get to see each other face-to-face.

General Trends in Bridging Ties

Most of the participants had few ties with full-time non-retired residents near their winter communities and tended to speak of their ties with other nearby non-retired communities in strictly economic terms, mostly because their relationships with working people were with those working in the service industry (clerks, house cleaners, nurses, etc). With the exception of attending church, only one of the participants were members of organizations often associated with bridging capital, such as volunteer organizations, Rotary Clubs, etc. Among participants who were members of such organizations at home, they found themselves gradually becoming less and less involved the longer they migrated.

Snowbirds and “Crackers”: **Bridging Ties with Non-retirees.** Eight out of nine participants of the study said they had no non-retired friends nearby in their winter homes, and these eight participants also said the only reasons they would travel to the “outside” would be for entertainment like movies, theatre, or museums not offered in their communities. Depending on the size of the retirement community, even these things may be available in the development, with no need to leave. Cathy, who has settled in one of the largest and oldest retirement developments in the country, describes why she seldom leaves her development:

We have pretty much everything that we need there, right within the community. Restaurants and a movie theater. I'm content right within the community. Sometimes I got outside of it a little bit for bigger stores and specialty stores like that. Mostly I can find everything I want [here] including clothing. The church I belong to is right within the community, I have notions of helping in school and am kind of listening for an invitation to do that, but I think the fact that I'm only there for three months kinda...makes it hard. About the only young people I see down there are when I go to a mall or shopping mall or maybe the young wait people in the restaurants.

None of participants living in large planned communities knew or interacted on a regular basis with non-retirees that were not a part of their extended family except when encountering servers. Even those participants who lived in small trailer park communities, who had established bridging ties within the park, had few bridging ties to more age diverse communities nearby. As in previous studies, participants described their relationship with the "outside" in terms of their economic impact, which they viewed as a positive contribution (Blakely and Snyder 1997). Dan, who lives in a trailer park near the Mexican border, sees his economic contribution as vital:

If we didn't spend, I don't think they could function out there. Seriously. I'm serious, there're so many people out there whose work is gas or groceries. Another thing you might want to know is that it's right on the border so there's a lot of illegal crossings you know so half the community may be the border patrol. There're a lot of these people [who need the money].

Lonny, who lives in a gated community in Florida, describes the relationship between retirees and full-time non-retirees (whom he termed "crackers") as "symbiotic."

We both need each other. Retirees need the services, and the locals need the jobs. There's tension though, sure. I mean, I would say that the population of this town doubles between Christmas and Easter or so. Businesses and churches have to be geared up for that...the traffic doubles or triples, and crackers resent that because it changes everyday life. The roads are clogged, and "in season," if you go to a good restaurant in town, the wait is probably between forty-five minutes or an hour, and in the summer it's maybe five or ten. But, at the same time, they have to have it. OK, for example, we bought our house in the late 90s from a contractor. He was a young guy, and he started out as an apprentice, and he told me "if it wasn't for the growth down here, I'd still be working as an apprentice." It's sure changed things down here, and I think it's a good thing.

Participants seem to feel that this economic, "symbiotic" relationship is more than fair, seeing as how non-retirees never volunteer in any of the retirement communities. However, the discussion of their relationship with the "outside" purely in terms of economics seems to suggest a lack of bridging ties to the surrounding metro area and even to other nearby suburbs.

Withdrawal from Bridging Organizations. Although the majority of study participants are members of churches in both Minnesota and their winter communities, almost all became less involved in church activities (excepting Sunday services) the longer they had been migrating. One participant grew more involved in church activities, becoming a part-time grief counselor at his winter church, but only after he found himself spending the majority of time in Florida. He also attended a church that catered almost exclusively to retirees, limiting the bridging capital that might be gained from his involvement. One participant, Janet, tried to maintain her position as a deacon in her church in Minnesota, but was unable to divide her time between the job and her winter migration:

There were several years when I pretty much stayed in town [because of my mother and church]. She was in a nursing home and I wasn't able to go as much. After she died I [still] had a big job at church but I felt I had to come back and forth for it, so I had to decide, I guess. We sing in the choir in our church here [in Minnesota], both of us. And we found a little church down there, very close to [our community], and so hopefully this year we'll sing in the choir there, but I need to get a little more involved in that church there, we're very involved in our church here.

Although Janet still sings in the choir, she resigned as a deacon because she felt she could not do it any more as she traveled between two places. Karina also spoke of “withdrawing” from her previous activities the longer she and her husband migrated:

I found that it's very hard to keep up, since we're traveling so much...it really is hard to keep up with things like I used to substitute teach or drop down to help at the community college [where I used to teach]. It's been pretty gradual, over the years, but it is just hard since we're never in one place for as long, even when we're not down there we're always driving up to see the kids and grandkids since my daughter remarried.

In both these cases, it is *time* that is the major factor that seems to weaken or prevent the establishment of bridging ties. Because the participants spend so much time traveling between two places, and because they spent a limited amount of time in each place, bridging ties are the first to fall by the wayside. This seems to be a trend in both primary and winter homes. The feeling that there is not “enough time” to commit to anything in either place prevents commitment in both places.

Bucking the Trend: Ties in Smaller Communities

Bonding Ties in Smaller Communities. The trends of weakening ties were not universal among the study participants. The five participants who lived in smaller communities and non age-segregated communities reported forming stronger friendships and support networks with the neighbors they had met there than those in larger developments. The three participants who lived in trailer parks all shared a single multipurpose community “clubhouse” that included communal kitchens, lending libraries, and showers for those whose trailers or RVs did not include them, where they often encountered their neighbors. They often held potlucks and birthday parties for each other, as well as providing help for friends in the hospital such as cooking and driving for them and their spouse. Valerie, who migrates with her husband to a trailer park organized around the trap shooting community, says the sense of community is palpable in the way people respond if someone is in trouble:

If you’re out on the road [in your car] and you pop your hood, ten guys’ll be out there to check on you... And I think that they would do it for a newcomer, if somebody’s just arrived. It would be the same as if it were one of us who had been there for sometime. Somebody just gets in there immediately and takes over. And we feel very good about the community down there.

Unlike the participants who live in larger retirement developments, the participants who live in the smaller trailer park communities say they have most of their friends in the parks are their neighbors, not people that they know from ‘home,’ said Fred, who lives five months of the year in a trailer park outside of Phoenix, Arizona. “We’re friends with about two couples we know from back home, but about, oh, half a dozen or so we know

from coming down here, especially two couples from Quebec. Most of the people we're friends with down here are from elsewhere." Rick, who lives five months of the year on a small barrier island just off the coast of Florida, says,

We've made a lot of friends down here, both my wife and I, and we feel very comfortable with everyone here. We would trust the neighbors, you know, if we were gone on a trip or there was an emergency even if we didn't know them so well. But we're friends with a good number of them on our street too.

Like other study participants who live in larger communities, all of the participants who lived in smaller communities also made a strong effort to stay in touch with friends and family who were not nearby, but they also formed bonding ties with those around them and said that their closest friends in their winter communities were those they had met there. As Valerie commented, "we get excited to go down there and see our friends again. It's a much closer community down there than it is up here [in Minnesota]."

Bridging Ties in Smaller Communities. The three participants who lived in trailer parks in the desert had strong bonding ties with the neighbors and were heavily involved in their community, but lacked bridging ties to the "outside," mostly because they were relatively isolated from other towns or parks. However, Rick, who lived in a small town on a barrier island in Florida with a winter population evenly divided between snowbirds and full-time, non-retired residents, volunteered at the local library and helped run an after school program for the island's school children. He was the only study participant who had friends who were non-retired. He also biked or walked everywhere on the island, and believed that this helped him to meet "diverse" people.

You just see a lot more people than you would at home –everyone’s outside, for one, because the weather’s better-but I think it’s also because it’s on an island, which is pretty small. There’s people with their kids, and other people our age [retirees] and everyone gets around on foot or bike pretty much. Plus, we have a lot of community events, like fundraisers for various things that need to get done, like money for the schools and things. I volunteer part time in the public library, so I help a lot with events and planning there, and there are some parents [of young children] that help out with that too.

Rick is active in his community and interacts with a variety of people. He also said that he would trust anyone on the island to watch his house while he is back in Minnesota and that he often hires neighbors’ children to housesit for him in the summer or when he and his wife make trips “to the mainland.” This stands in marked contrast to the respondents who lived in larger, age-segregated communities, who did not know or trust their neighbors, and did not form any sort of relationship with diverse groups in age or interest. Rick is involved in fundraisers; he knows and trusts children and parents, who are outside of his age and interest group. The community he lives in also defies the three negative characteristics of urban small: it is small, socially diverse, and there is a strong sense of community, reinforced by the fact that it is located on a small island. Even though residents must leave the island to find food, work, and entertainment, there is still a sense of community, even between full and part-time residents. While Rick admits that most of his friendships on the island, particularly those with non-retired people and their children are not “deep friendships,” such as those he enjoys with his friends from college, he is still forming acquaintances with them, and trusts them to watch his house when he is out

of town, indicating the fact that he maintains bridging ties with families on the island outside of a social network established in Minnesota and brought down to the island.

Summary

Study participants who lived part-time in large retirement communities of ten thousand or more reported a loss of bridging capital (such as church contacts) and little gain in bonding or bridging capital in their winter communities. They seldom knew their neighbors and their closest friends in these developments tended to be people they knew from previous social networks in their home states. The study participants and their family or long-term friends were also engaged in a pattern of “chain migration,” where one person in the networked moved down and encouraged another to move down as well, a development that is not talked about in either Putnam’s discussion of urban sprawl nor the previous literature on migrant retirees. In contrast, participants who lived in smaller communities knew their neighbors well and established close, bonding ties with them. Although only Rick, the man who migrates to a small mixed-age town has significant established significant bridging ties through his volunteer work, other participants may have established more bridging ties if their communities were either more heterogeneous or less isolated. Overall, it seems that maintenance and formation of social ties is closely linked to the type of development respondents have chosen for their second home, and the gap in social class between full and part time residents is not the only, or even the primary reason for the lack of social ties between working and retired people. Rather, the lack of bridging capital between these two groups is part and parcel of a general lack of new bonds formed by snowbirds in large developments.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study both confirm and challenge previous research concerning elderly migration. Statistically, the study population fits the demographic of the young - old. The majority had a college education, were financially well off, and in good health, with living parents, siblings, and children. The patterns of distance and lack of direct engagement with non-retired communities reported in previous literature is corroborated by the experiences of study participants as well, many of whom reported interacting with non-retired people and the host community only when they were in need of goods and services, and otherwise remaining in residential suburbs and exurbs composed mainly or totally of retirees.

Although Putnam does not attribute loss of social capital primarily to urban sprawl, the effects described in his work seem to reflect strongly on the formation of social bonds among snowbirds. Retirees who lived in large and age-segregated developments reported a lack of both bridging and bonding ties in their secondary communities, as well as a decline in bridging ties in their home communities as they withdrew from volunteerism and church activities due the lack of time they had once they began to migrate. The rise of ever more inexpensive and reliable internet and long-distance phone service, as well as a drop in travel costs has made it much easier for these retirees to maintain close bonds with friends and family. This, combined with the chain migration of close family and friends to the same developments also seem to have

removed incentive for snowbirds to establish new close relationships with fellow residents in their winter communities.

Not all retirees withdrew, however. While they remained equally unconnected to the non-retired in their winter homes, the three subjects who lived in trailer parks, and the two who lived in mixed-aged development reported making more good friends in their secondary communities, participating actively in community events such as potlucks and birthdays, and knowing and trusting their neighbors, sometimes more than their neighbors “back home” in Minnesota. They also report fewer visits from family and friends who do not live in the community, mostly because they have little space or time to accommodate guests, another factor which could encourage new bonds.

While previous research on retirees has accurately described some of the phenomena that snowbirds that participated in this study experience, these observations match Putnam’s discussion of the effects of urban sprawl and commuting on the social ties of non-retirees (2001). Time, social homogeneity, and lack of community boundedness were all cited by participants as obstacles that stood in the way of establishing friendships or participating in ‘bridging’ organizations like church outreach programs, volunteer organizations, etc., while age and class were not seen as barriers by respondents, although it may have been a larger factor than participants living in homogenous communities realized. Most respondents did not see the lack of new social ties as a problem, as they already had established friends and social networks.

These trends suggest that social ties among snowbirds are affected not by their age or distance from family and friends but by the type of community they live in. While having a friend or family member in a community encouraged participants to buy a second home there, smaller communities foster friendships and community involvement, even if residents are there for only a few months of the year. In contrast, living in larger developments decreased the number of new friends made in the secondary community and increased the number of long-standing friends that also lived in the development.

The fact that snowbirds settling in large developments have weak social ties with both their neighbors and the surrounding non-retired community indicates that weak community ties are not simply a result of age segregation but of Putnam's three effects of sprawl on social capital. While his theory was originally applied to working commuters traveling between residential suburban communities and urban workplaces, seasonal migration between two or even three homes reduces the amount of time spent in any one place, and increases the amount of time spent in transit just as it does for the average commuter. While communities may also be organized and kept homogenous strictly by age, with no residents under 55, homogeneity is also maintained just as much by common interests and by chain migration of similar, and even related people. Finally, the lack of community boundedness, a feeling that no one is really "from" there, seems to have discouraged many participants from establishing close friendships or more distant bridging ties.

Previous research on retirement migration has given a detailed description of the economic impact of local communities and to local frustrations with large numbers of migrant retirees, yet has failed to explain the reasons for the perceived social and economic inequalities between migrant retirees and local non-retired residents. This study, while small, has suggested that these inequalities have little to do with the fact that the study subjects were retirees but rather to do with the type of communities they had settled in and the endemic nature of urban sprawl in the Sunbelt states. Subjects felt unconnected to the area of their secondary homes because of the factors of urban sprawl and were unwilling to or unable because of the brief amount of time spent in the secondary location to establish new social ties.

Suggestions for Future Research

I believe that this study has stumbled upon some themes in need of further, more intensive review, most notably the effects of community boundedness and chain migration as well as homogeneity on both bridging and bonding ties, neither of which is mentioned in previous studies of retirement migration in the United States. This study is by no means a complete survey the subject, due the to small sample size involved, but it has suggested a variety of topics that might be further explored in future, focused research.

A larger scale qualitative or quantitative survey of the population may be needed concerning the issues raised in this study that have not been discussed in previous

literature, including chain migration and community boundedness, as well as how the homogeneity of interest (on the trapshooting range) also helped to bond individuals. Since all nine of the participants talked about being a part of chain migration to a particular development, it seems to be the most concrete of the trends that has not yet been examined by previous research, and a larger scale survey, either quantitative or qualitative, could help to expose whether or not it is a larger national trend or specific only to this population in Minnesota. Chain migration feeds into the idea of the “boundedness” of these communities, which also has not been explored in the context of retirement migration.

There was also little research on the homogeneity of retirement developments, which may in fact be an example of the last form of legal segregation in the U.S. Because they are segregated by age, interest, and often class, large retirement developments create some of the most homogenous populations in the nation. Although this study has suggested that this has had a profound impact of the building of both bridging and bonding ties, a more intensive study could see whether or not this was really the case.

My study also did not address in depth how snowbirds interacted with the non-retired in their home state and the impacts that migration had upon these relationships. Since most of the interview respondents lived regular, non-age segregated neighborhoods, the circumstances are quite different than in the case of age-segregated communities in the Sunbelt, and deserve additional attention. Also, the role of cheap and

easy communication and travel has not really been explored (especially the Internet). Previous studies on the effects of the spatial segregation were conducted in the 1980's, when Internet access was not widely available and long distance phone calls were still something of a luxury. All of these things are not adequately addressed in my study and deserve further exploration.

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