

An informal space supporting autonomy, choice and the maintenance of social networks: Using community transport in rural Northern Ireland

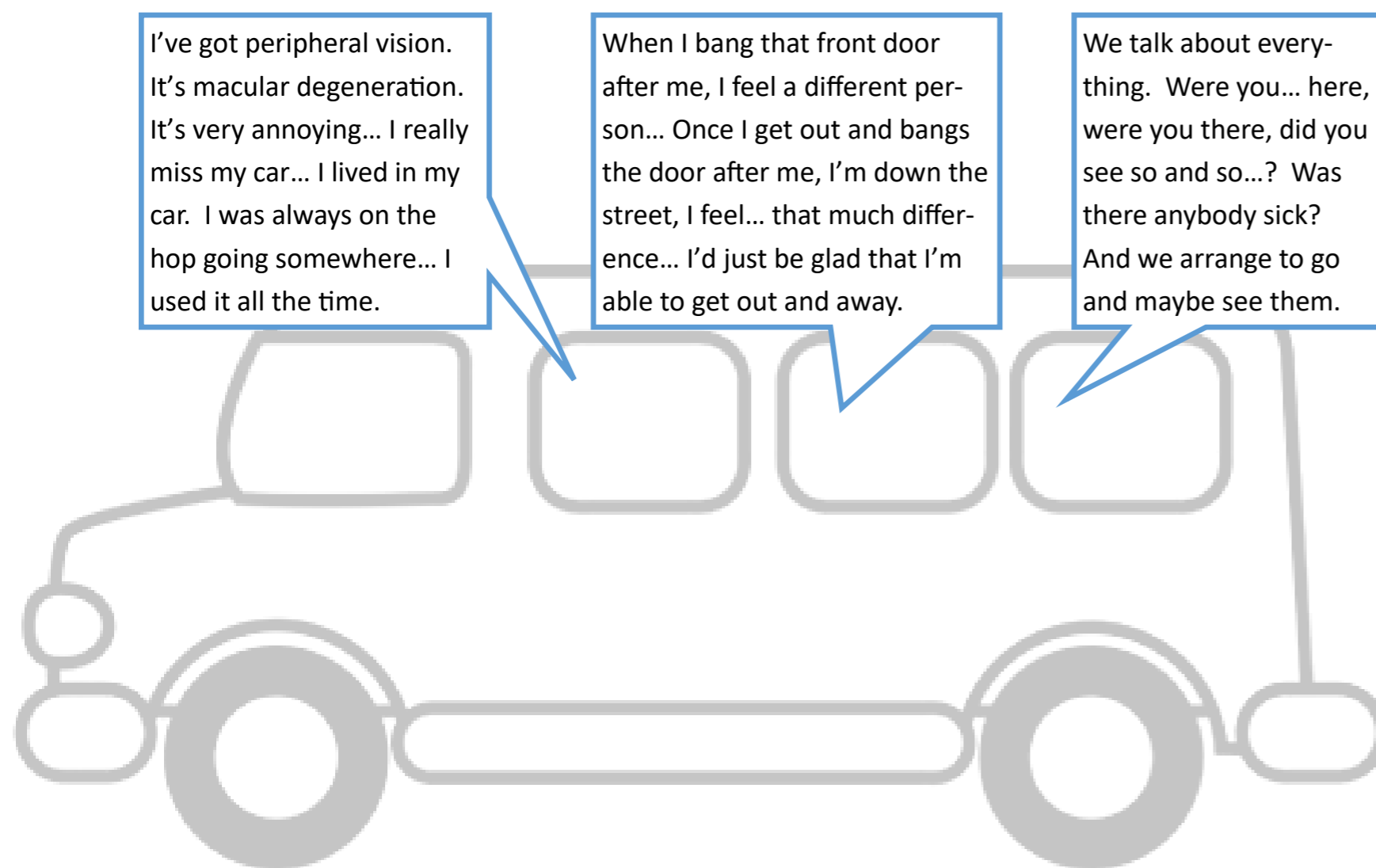
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Abstract

Rural-dwelling older adults' social networks shrink due to transitions in later life related to poor physical health, mobility difficulties and bereavements. Being rurally located adds an extra layer of disadvantage. Older adults may use community transport as a means both to facilitate important tasks, and also maintain friendships and other valued relationships. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 11 users of a rural transport community bus service in western Northern Ireland. The interviews identified that participants viewed the transport system as a highly valued conduit for helping escape isolation, maintaining autonomy, and providing an informal space for relationship building and accessing local news.



Theme One: Escaping loss, loneliness and isolation

Respondents lived in isolated rural areas, often with no immediate neighbours. Public transport was inaccessible or dangerous to access. Later life losses, such as ill health and bereavement, impeded interviewees' ability to do what they wanted. However, rural community transport services allowed these rural dwellers access to social activities, shopping and appointments

Theme Two: Being able to execute autonomy

The community transport service enabled participants to retain some level of independence, though the assistance of bus drivers was appreciated for certain tasks, such as helping lift shopping. For those with mobility difficulties, the bus provided a way of getting out of the house. And for those who still drove, community transport was preferred for difficult journeys.

Theme Three: Making connections on the bus

There may have been a specific purpose for journeys, but participants reflected upon how the buses became social spaces where individuals became acquainted or reacquainted. Informal chat raised spirits, reminiscing was valued and catching up on the local news from rural townlands was especially meaningful.

Discussion

The use of this service helps promote participants' autonomy and personal choice as well as providing an informal social space for enjoyable interaction and local news updates. Although community transport schemes may be considered stigmatising, participants valued how the bus service allowed them access to meaningful activities outside the home. The rural transport scheme is an example of an equitable service, making accessible venues and services to those at greater risk of social exclusion. Women, who made up the majority of respondents and who live longer with poorer health, reported how they enjoyed the bus as a venue for socialisation and 'opportunistic interaction' (Green et al., 2014:480).



for rural-dwelling older adults. *Ageing & Society* 1-21.