

11.

Aging in Place: Revision of the Concept?

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Introduction

The ever more established concept of “aging in place” is defined as a relatively rigid, mechanical relation to a narrowly defined location (community, neighbourhood, surroundings) or even more utilitarian, directly to the dwelling of an aging individual. This chapter provides an incentive for revision of the concept of aging in place, backed by the statements of Czech seniors relating to the significance and functions of exterior – and also more distant – environments in their daily life. The source qualitative data comes from semi-structured interviews with respondents (N=46; m=18, f=28) aged 65 to 93, acquired in the scope of the research project “The DIPEX Methodology in the Field of Active Aging”.

Aging in place

The problem of aging in place (AIP) is a surprisingly young subject in social sciences discourse, and its significance is growing together with the accelerating aging of the population of the West. Gerontological periodicals have devoted systematic attention to the concept of AIP since the first decade of the 21st century (Vasunilashorn et al., 2012). Geographers began to use the concept of AIP itself at the end of the 1980s for designating a “process of cohort transition to increasing age and residential inertia” (Graff & Wiseman, 1978, p. 382), and it was likewise established in sociology (e.g. Pampel & Choldin, 1978). The first occurrence of the term AIP in the professional literature, however, probably dates from the year 1936 and is related to the optimal method of aging the mineral opal: “Opals, which carry considerable amounts of moisture when brought directly into the air, dry out too rapidly and fall to pieces. This may be prevented somewhat by burying them into oil or mud for some period of time. However, no scheme of tempering is as satisfactory as the *aging in place* which takes place in nature” (Howard, 1936, p. 555).

A metaphor is thus offered (Kuhn, 1993) regarding the actual social sciences use of the term, which is concerned with healthy and socially inclusive aging in a place and a community (Wija & Holmerová, 2013). Conceptualization of the concept of AIP in the last three decades was the subject of a review article with the significant name “Aging in place: Evolution of a research topic whose time has come” (Vasunilashorn et al., 2012), where the topics were quantifiably focused thus: “environment (36%), services (29%), health and functioning (15%), other (13%), and technology (7%).” (p. 3). It is important to note that this quantification related to 11 influential gerontological magazines.

During our research of the concept of AIP in the EBSCO databases we estimate that approximately 70% of the searched references are concerned with services and technologies or technical solutions for aging in place and are usually associated with health problems. The utilitarian focus of the texts and specialized magazines is evident, when a multidisciplinary authorial team is, for example, covered by an architectural approach (e.g. Wang, Shepley, & Rodiek, 2012; Andersson, 2011) and the solutions of the AIP problem become practical questions of design (e.g. Yen et al., 2014; Bevan, 2009).

It can be generally stated that the majority of elderly prefer aging in place (Iecovich, 2014; Vasunilashorn et al., 2012), and such a shift in the paradigmatic direction from institutionalization is evident in the form of financial costs of nursing homes (Vasunilashorn et al., 2012). For example, in the 1980s a huge expansion was recorded in the United Kingdom in institutional facilities for the growing population of elderly, but already by the end of the 1980s financial incentives which were massively expanded for this type of care for seniors were criticized as being “perverse” (Sixsmith & Sixsmith, 2008). The concept of AIP represents, aside from a research subject, also a major policy of the western world. “The basic premise of Aging in Place is that helping older people to remain living at home fundamentally and positively contributes to an increase in well-being, independence, social participation and healthy aging” (ibid., pp. 219-220).

The ecological framework of aging

The aging of individuals is always localised, linked with a specific place. Systematic interest on the study of individual sub-populations – including the aging – in an ecologically structured urbanized space was developed in the 20th century by the Chicago School in its concept human ecology, which was defined by McKenzie, a pupil of the founder of this approach Park, as “...a study of the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive, and accomodative forces of the environment. Human ecology is fundamentally interested in the effect of position, in both time and space, upon human institutions and human behaviour” (McKenzie, 1924). Human ecology constituted in its beginnings a powerful example of the reduction of the problem of the human world into natural analogous processes, whereas it applied in the exploration of human beings and the environment a strict empiricism, standardization, conceptualization and schematization, which principally influenced not only sociology, but also other social science disciplines. Distance from the central business district, mean housing value, population density, housing structure, etc. became the typical ecological variables (e.g. Pampel & Choldin, 1978). Geographers also took an interest in the study of populations in a space, primarily in the mapping of their diversified occurrence, concentrations and migrations, even including the subpopulation of the aging (e.g. Graff & Wiseman, 1978). A survey study including publications dealing with the relationship between the built environment and physical activities among seniors in the range of years 1966 – 2002 in its introduction states: “public health researchers and social scientists have ignored physical environment and focused on the social aspects of place and its effects on seniors” (Cunningham & Michael, 2004, p. 435). Ecologically relevant conclusions emphasize the great influence of the physical environment with the decision of an individual to be physically active, whereby with those older than 65 years walking dominates (pp. 437-8). The most important criteria for seniors in the analysed research articles for a period of 36 years of searching were the safety (mostly traffic, lighting) and aesthetics (usually like enjoyable scenery) of the environment (p. 441-2).

The environment is a known determinant of aging and in the framework of

intercultural comparison offers surprising findings (e.g. Sokolovsky, 2009). Of interest, for example, is the “Snowbird” phenomenon, relating in the original context to a large group of Canadian seasonal migrants heading for Florida (Sokolovsky, 2009). The predominately north-south direction of seasonal migration of seniors for warmth is also very evident in economically better off Europeans, in particular Scandinavians. We can assign this relatively new flow, called elderscapes (ibid.), to the group of global cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996), and we devote attention to it so that the concepts of home and community are entirely redefined in these bicultural elders (Sokolovsky, 2009). We assume that in Czech conditions cottagers can likewise be interpreted as a specific elderscape, which in later age acquires the character of seasonal or permanent changes of habitation.

In the given ecological framework home represents a specific microcosm, ensuring aging independence, security, privacy and comfort on a practical and symbolic level (Sixsmith & Sixsmith, 2008). “Home, however, is much more than physical environment. ...people and places are seen as engaged in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship through which home becomes a place of significant personal meaning” (Tanner, Tilse, & de Jonge, 2008, p. 195). “The benefit of aging in place is not automatic” (Sim et al., 2012, p. 390), above all, if we do not have positive memories associated with a place. “Place as a physical location may remain unchanged but place as an experience tied to memories, routines, physical features, and spatial configurations may be very different” (p. 376). “Home in old age can be a place of negative experiences, such as isolation and loneliness and there are often significant weaknesses in terms of informal support, physical environment of the home and neighbourhood and social network, which undermine the person’s ability to live independently” (p. 219).

Methods

The joint research project of the Olomouc University Social Health Institute (OUSHI) at Palacký University in Olomouc and the Prague College of Psychosocial Studies, called “The DIPEX Methodology in the Field of Active Aging”, supported in years 2014

and 2015 by the Technology Agency of Czech Republic (TA CR), provided the qualitative data partially analyzed in this chapter. The DIPEX methodology (Database of Individual Patient Experiences) was created with the Health Experiences Research Group at Oxford University. The goal of the above-mentioned project in Czech Republic is to certify and to apply this methodology. The selected target group consists of active seniors who are selected for participation in the research by the snowball method in the scope of the entire country. The research interest is through deep semi-structured interviews concentrated on understanding the experience of the process of their aging. They are thus a qualitative mapping of the factor of active aging.

From the 46 deep semi-structured interviews thus far conducted and recorded audio-visually (40 records) and audibly (6 records) and subsequently transcribed verbatim, 10 transcriptions containing significant replies of respondents in relation to the environment were selected and openly coded on the basis of content analysis, which is thus captured in the framework of the principle overlapping common scope of the AIP concept.

Preliminary research results

The presented samples are examples of replies of participants which compelled us when considering the subject of AIP toward arguments with the use of the defined concepts of place and environment in the scope of this concept. The samples are presented by assigning these statements to the relevant meaning units, created on the basis of a coding process.

Meaning unit religious spirituality:

[woman, age 76, widowed]

...we love nature here. Nature keeps us going. We go to nature like to church, to tell you the truth.

...we get up go to this forest and we feel well there. We always go up there and we say "this is a temple, isn't it?" And it's quiet there, you can think things over nicely there, in the comfort that a person find himself there, you have time for yourself...

Meaning unit reflections of transformation of environments in time:

[man, age 81, married]

...I'm not at all talking about what is changing in this, it's necessary in this village or in this whole world, where these differences in this situation, which today is completely different than it was, as is always said, in totalitarianism or even before then, but I experienced the entire world war, and this was completely distinctive, specifically here in these Beskydys [Czech mountains].

...the largest, the most beautiful nature and experience is the forest, and it's beautiful to see there what an old tree is, lingering, even though the bark beetles have attacked it, or pollutants which are falling on this landscape, but the worst is a forest which reflects myself and this is a question of age and the state in this age. It angers me more that this society is trying in its own way to change this country; now we're dealing a golf course here or the huge luxury cars, the great noise, the people who were on the meadows oppose putting another building there, because they bring such noise there, that noise and chirping of this new life style and this changes the countryside, in truth I think that it's beginning in its own way to be so disturbed, so old, and since many say this is new, this is perfect, we have new highways here new golf courses, we have here loads of these conveniences, and in this country, today mobiles and telephones and computers and I'm already outside the country there, but a place to look out at the countryside where this was always beautiful rest, so I look there at the television and replace it, even though I don't much like it. That's enough about the countryside.

Well I always still find at least a little of this space here, where indeed I can more or less escape there from the central environment of this village, which I always thought was such a nice foothills area, and I escape under the mountains where the rest of this foothills environment still exists. And there as it were I feel still far better, freer, happier, even though this noise, those cars and this local disturbed environment are hard on me.

Note: Our data, aside from others, display the importance of recreational movement through the landscape, particularly in a forest environment where a specific connection exists with a passion for collecting mushrooms. In Czech Republic this phenomenon is linked with the significant tradition of hiking. The possibility itself of almost free movement through the countryside represents an important determinant, which is not common in other lands.

Conclusion

This chapter provides incentives for revision of the concept of AIP on two levels. First, when we start from existing research traditions in the given area, it's possible

to point out an overall inability of research to explain the concept of AIP, which consists for the most part in the interdisciplinary inter-space. Research is realised above all in an applied sphere and to a certain measure relates to the best traditions of positivism, when the subject of AIP is reduced to a technical problem. Second, a place itself, from the closer definition, such as a dwelling up through the broader definition as an environment, is usually determined on the basis of quantitative criteria. A place itself, however, takes on many dimensions: a physical one (home or neighbourhood), a social one (relationships with others), an emotional and psychological one (sense of belonging and attachment) and a cultural one (values, beliefs, ethnicity and symbolic meanings) (Iecovich, 2014). We propose the introduction of a qualitative dimension to the defining of the place itself in the concept of AIP, which enables the consideration of the importance of place. In regard to empirical evidence of the functional dispositions of a place, we thus obtain data about its role in the experiencing of everyday life. Regarding the description of place we obtain an understanding of its importance from the position of the target group. A relevant example of the benefits of use of a qualitative approach with surveys of AIP is the mixed-methods research project of relocation of a community of seniors (Sim et al., 2012), discussing the following: "From the quantitative data, differences in the various measures of well-being between movers and non-movers were found to be statistically nonsignificant ... The qualitative findings paint a more nuanced picture, highlighting the individuality of responses to relocation and the way in which these are related to the phase of the relocation process and other contextual factors. The psychological and emotional responses to relocation were complex" (pp. 389-390). A similar direction in dealing with AIP can be to identify in the present application of phenomenological (sense of place, place attachment, place identity), transactional (holism, non-deterministic causation) and ecological (avoiding the subject-object dualism) perspectives (Cutchin, 2003). We propose the analogous restitution of the concept of a home. The roots of the starting points for such research could aim toward Heidegger (2006), Eliade (2006) or Norberg-Schulz (1994), whose concept of phenomenological architecture has notable potential also on the level of practical realisation.

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