



## The quest for residential normalcy by older adults: Relocation but one pathway

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### ABSTRACT

This paper constructs a holistic emotion-based theoretical model identifying various pathways by which older adults can occupy residential environments that are congruent with their needs and goals. The model equates this individual-environment fittingness or “residential normalcy” with older persons having favorable or positive emotion-based residential experiences that have relevance to them. Older persons are theorized as being in their residential comfort zones when they experience overall pleasurable, hassle-free, and memorable feelings about where they live; and in their residential mastery zones when they occupy places in which they feel overall competent and in control. When older persons are out of either (or both) of these experiential zones, they are expected to initiate accommodative and/or assimilative forms of coping to achieve residential normalcy. The former are mind strategies by which they change their residential goals or assessments, mollify their negative emotional experiences, or engage in denial behaviors; the latter are action strategies, by which they change their activities or modify their residential settings. Moving to a new address is the most studied and prominent assimilative coping strategy, but also the one that requires the most strenuous adaptive efforts. The model theorizes that older persons move only under certain conditions.

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### Introduction

Even as we have historically constructed theories that elaborate on the principles of successful aging, we have failed to construct comparable treatments that generalize about where to grow old successfully. Environmental gerontologists agree that such a theoretical account would specify the conditions under which the residential environments or places of older adults are fitting or congruent with their current needs and goals (Moore, VanHaitsma, Curyto, & Saperstein, 2003; Scheidt & Windley, 2006; Wahl & Oswald, 2009). This would be true whether they occupy conventional dwellings and neighborhoods or planned senior housing arrangements, such as active adult communities, independent living communities, assisted living, or even nursing homes. A theory that predicted if older adults were living in such optimal places would be especially helpful for under-

standing whether they would benefit from modifications to their residential or care environments or alternatively suffer from bad outcomes. It would also contribute to our understanding of why older adults stay put in their current dwellings – that is, age in place – as opposed to relocating to another address.

The theoretical model constructed in this paper (Fig. 1) proposes several pathways by which older adults can occupy residential environments that fit their needs and goals. The model equates these congruent residential environments with older persons having overall favorable or positive emotion-based residential experiences, that is *residential normalcy*:

*Places where they experience overall pleasurable, hassle-free, and memorable feelings that have relevance to them; and where they feel both competent and in control – that is, they do not have to behave in personally objectionable ways or to unduly surrender mastery of their lives or environments to others.*

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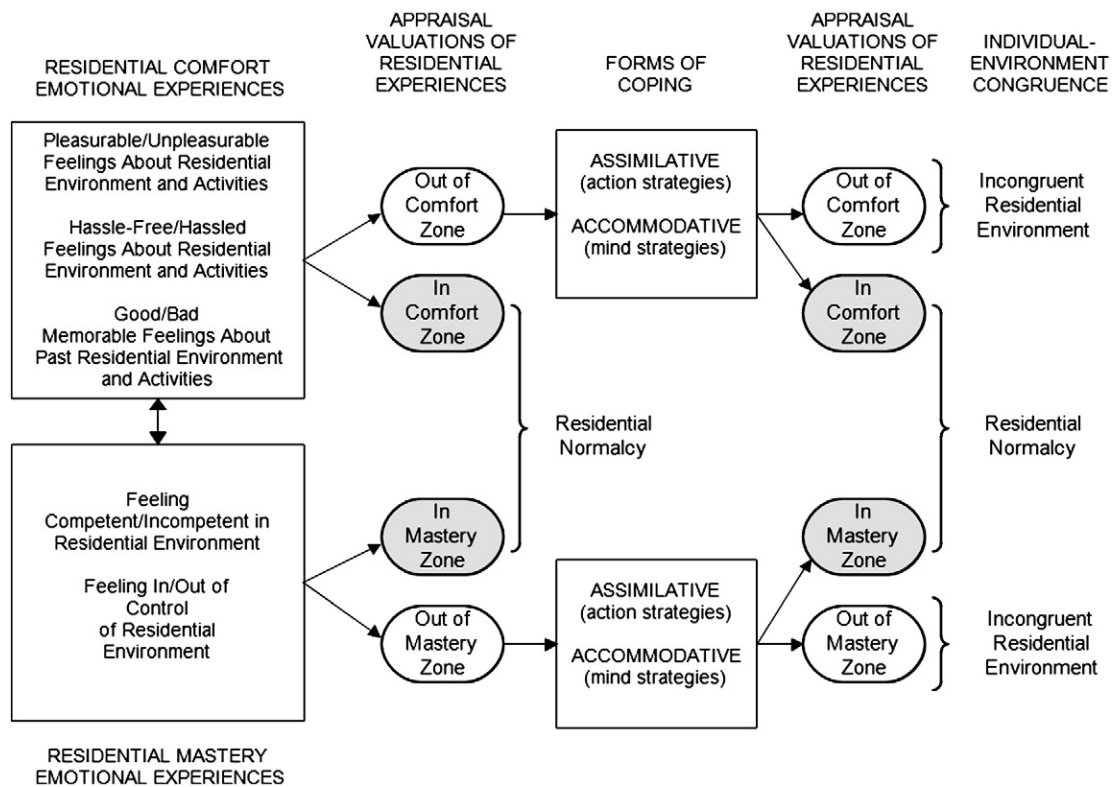


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of residential normalcy.

The model argues that congruence is often not an all or nothing affair. Rather, older adults can find themselves in residential arrangements that suffer from split personalities. On the one hand, they have qualities that make them ideal places to live; on the other hand, many other features are discordant with their needs and goals. This incongruence is often transitory, however, because older persons are able to draw on a repertoire of coping strategies in their quest to achieve residential normalcy. These adaptive efforts include moving as one option, but older persons often can achieve congruent residential environments by many other strategies, even as they are aging in place. There is no guarantee, however, that when older persons achieve residential normalcy, professionals will concur. Their objective criteria of success or failure may be at considerable odds with the subjective worlds of elder residents.

**Background**

Epistemologically, the theoretical model offers an interactional worldview perspective on understanding the individual-environment fit of older adults' residential settings (Magnusson & Torestad, 1992). It focuses on how older persons subjectively experience their residences, that is, "not on how the person and situation, as two separate parts of equal importance, interact [but] rather how individuals by their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, function in relation to the environment" (Magnusson, 1985:117). The interactional perspective of the model, however, does not preclude it from acknowledging that older adults occupy residential

environments that researchers can objectively denote as having a broad array of potentially beneficial and harmful components and features. It also does not deny the possibility that the significant others of older people – e.g., friends or family members – influence how they feel about where they live (Sergeant & Ekerdt, 2008). Additionally, the model recognizes that multiple individual differences influence how older people perceive and evaluate their objectively denoted worlds and adapt to its vagaries (Golant, 1998).

The epistemological focus of the model differentiates it from the traditional life course model (Rossi, 1955). Gerontologists have identified major life events, sometimes referred to as "shocks" (Calvo, Haverstick, & Zhivan, 2009) – such as retirement, widowhood, disability, and deteriorating health – that contribute to the incongruence of residential environments and trigger moves by persons as they age (Litwak & Longino, 1987). These treatments primarily emphasize how individual differences among older people influence their relocation behaviors, and only inconsistently address the role played by their residential environments – whether objectively or subjectively conceived (Sergeant & Ekerdt, 2008). The proposed model also differs from a second set of theoretical treatments that explain older people's disaffection with their current residence and their subsequent moving behaviors by their push (at origin) and pull (at destination) characteristics (Walters, 2002). These formulations primarily emphasize the influence of objectively defined environmental indicators.

Some representative studies have focused on the emotional responses of older people to their everyday activities or

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