



Dealing with change in old age: Negotiating working-class belonging in a neighbourhood in the process of urban renewal in the Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

'Ageing in place' policies presuppose that growing old in one's own home and neighbourhood is in the best interests of older adults, as a familiar and predictable environment fosters autonomy and well-being in old age. However, discontinuities of place can challenge the relationship between older adults and their neighbourhood. This paper addresses the impact of neighbourhood transitions on older adults' sense of belonging in the Netherlands by exploring how they deal with changes in the neighbourhood in their everyday life. The context of this qualitative research is a former working-class neighbourhood in the process of urban renewal. Our findings show how a sense of belonging is negotiated in relation to everyday places and interactions within the neighbourhood, providing a sense of continuity despite neighbourhood change.

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1. Introduction

In response to the increasing costs of ageing societies, Western governments have implemented policies that foster 'ageing in place' (i.e. growing old in one's own home and neighbourhood) in order to postpone and decrease expensive institutionalised care (Wiles et al., 2012). Ageing in place policies presuppose that growing old in one's own home and community is in the best interests of older adults, as they can age within a familiar and predictable environment (Davies and James, 2011). Informal support and care, as well as knowledge of the physical neighbourhood, should enable older adults to maintain a sense of autonomy and well-being when health and mobility deteriorates (WHO, 2002). However, this idealised notion of ageing in place may not correspond to the everyday lives of community-dwelling older adults (Milligan, 2009). The urban sociologist Arnold Reijndorp (2007) has criticised ageing in place policies for not considering how neighbourhood transitions, such as population change and the upscaling of facilities, can transform urban neighbourhoods into unfamiliar environments. Not much is known about the meaning of neighbourhood transitions for older adults themselves. This paper draws attention to the discontinuities of ageing in place by examining the impact of

neighbourhood transitions on retired older adults'¹ sense of belonging.

In the past decade, the neighbourhood as a context of ageing has received more attention from policymakers (Global Age-Friendly Cities guide by WHO, 2007) and researchers. Several authors in a wide range of disciplines have identified the important role of the neighbourhood in older adults' sense of belonging and well-being (see Gardner, 2011; Wiles et al., 2012). Local informal social networks, including neighbours, service personnel and people on the street, contribute to well-being in the everyday lives of older adults (see e.g. Russell, 2005; Peace et al., 2006; Gardner, 2011; Wiles et al., 2012; Van Hoven and Douma, 2012). Recent research by Ziegler (2012) and Buffel et al. (2013) indicates how a changing neighbourhood can challenge older adults' sense of belonging and social relationships, thereby increasing the likelihood of social exclusion. However, studies focusing on the impact of neighbourhood transitions on older adults' everyday encounters and places remain scarce (Phillipson, 2010).

Social and physical transformations of place can challenge one's social and emotional connections with the neighbourhood, especially when these changes are rapid and intense (Jones and

¹ In Dutch policy, the age at which people are labelled as 'older' depends on the policy area, for example, labour participation of older people concerns those aged 50–65 years, while in the care sector, older people are those aged 75+ years (Van Nimwegen and Van Praag, 2012). In the context of this research, we adopt the current retirement age (65+) to define older adults, since from this age onwards they are likely to spend more time in the home and neighbourhood. This may be especially the case for men who used to be the breadwinner of the family.

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Evans, 2012). This can lead to feelings of disorientation, grief and alienation (Brown and Perkins, 1992; Fullilove, 1996; Fried, 2000; Hörschelmann and Van Hoven, 2003). Neighbourhood transitions can be particularly challenging for older adults' sense of belonging as reduced mobility, decreasing health, and retirement heightens the importance of the neighbourhood as a central setting of experience (cf. Phillips et al., 2005). Those who receive only a state pension² may be even more restricted to their locality since they lack the financial means to venture or move outside the neighbourhood, while more affluent older adults can choose their living environment by moving to retirement communities, for example (Phillipson, 2007). Less affluent older adults often live in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. In the Netherlands, the social and physical character of many of these neighbourhoods is constantly and significantly transformed as a result of state-led urban renewal strategies. These strategies are aimed at improving the liveability of disadvantaged neighbourhoods in order to address urban problems such as crime and disturbance of public order (Uitermark et al., 2007). To achieve this, municipalities and housing associations attract middle-class households to the neighbourhood in order to 'civilise' its predominantly working-class residents (Uitermark et al., 2007, p. 138). A relatively high proportion of older adults in the Netherlands have lived their whole life in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (30% compared to 18% in non-deprived neighbourhoods) (Van der Meer et al., 2008). Those who have lived in the neighbourhood for a long time may have problems adapting to their changing surroundings as new norms and practices evolve, making them feel 'out of place' (Rowles and Watkins, 2003; Milligan et al., 2005). The rejection of local working-class values and segregation practices of the middle class may further threaten older residents' sense of belonging to the neighbourhood (Savage et al., 2005; Paton, 2009).

This paper investigates how retired older adults in an urban neighbourhood in Groningen, a city in the Northern Netherlands, experience and negotiate neighbourhood transitions in everyday life. This neighbourhood, the Oosterpark, is a former Dutch working-class neighbourhood that is in the process of urban renewal. First, we discuss how the relationship between ageing and place, and the way in which older adults deal with discontinuities of place, have so far been approached. We then examine a relational approach to ageing and place in an attempt to understand 'the complex patterns of continuity and change [in] individuals' interactions with their social and physical environment' (Ziegler, 2012, p. 1). Next we introduce the research location, the qualitative data collection methods and the respondents. The analysis focuses on places and interactions through which the respondents negotiate a sense of continuity and belonging in everyday life.

2. Place making in old age: functional and affective dimensions

The main understandings of the relationship between ageing and place were developed in the 1970s, in the fields of geography, and social and environmental gerontology (Andrews et al., 2009). This decade produced two strands of research, one in which the person–environment relationship was understood in functional terms, and one in which the experiential and affective bonds with places were stressed. The former is represented by the Ecological Theory of Ageing (ETA), developed by Lawton and colleagues (Lawton and Nahemow, 1973; Lawton, 1977). In ETA, the relationship between an ageing person and his/her environment is understood in functional terms (i.e. how places are helpful in engaging in everyday activities). Older adults' behaviour is explained as the

outcome of personal competences (e.g. physical and mental health) and environmental press (aspects of the environment which can have a demanding character) (Lawton, 1977). An imbalance between competences and press results in a misfit between people and place which leads to maladaptive behaviour and negative affect. A recent example of work using ETA is a study by Van der Meer et al. (2008), who found that vulnerable older adults (those lacking personal and household resources) experienced more environmental stress in deprived neighbourhoods (where environmental press is high) than in non-deprived neighbourhoods.

In the second strand of research, in which the affective and experiential dimensions of the person–environment relationship are highlighted, Rowles' research (1978, 1983) takes centre stage. Rowles developed the concepts of social, physical and autobiographical 'insiderness.' These result from the norms and rules of behaviour (social), spatial routines and habits (physical), and the remembrance of events that develop with place over time (autobiographical). The familiarity and sense of self that people derive from places contribute to the development of place attachments (i.e. affective bonds with places) (Altman and Low, 1992). In old age, place attachments provide a sense of continuity of identity, serving as a way to keep memories of the life course alive (Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). Furthermore, familiarity, attachment and identity are thought to be especially important with regard to older adults, as they can relieve the negative impacts of physical and mental deterioration (Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). Fullilove (1996) has argued that these three themes – familiarity, attachment and identity – are the main psychological processes that confer a sense of belonging, which in turn contributes to psychological well-being.

Recently, Smith (2009), in a qualitative study on ageing in deprived urban neighbourhoods in Canada and England, reconceptualised the person–environment relationship by merging ETA with place attachment. By doing so, older adults' behaviour in relation to place was explained by functional as well as affective motivations. This approach challenged the unidirectional relationship between personal competences and environmental press. For instance, Smith found that although older adults experience strong environmental press, attachment to the neighbourhood can mitigate negative consequences of such an environmental press on their well-being. Furthermore, Smith highlighted the agency of older adults by showing how they are able to negotiate everyday life in a high-crime neighbourhood. The agency of older adults in dealing with discontinuities of place and self has also been stressed by Rowles and Watkins (2003), who talk about 'place making' practices that people can use in order to re-establish disrupted place attachments. In earlier work on the geographical experience of older adults in a deteriorating inner-city neighbourhood in the United States, Rowles (1978) noted that older adults intensify their feelings about certain spaces as a strategy for maintaining a sense of identity in a changing environment. However, Phillipson et al. (2001, p. 259) in their work on changes in the family and community life of older adults in three urban areas in the United Kingdom, indicated that, depending on the nature of change, such strategies may not always be successful: 'Whatever this urban world had been designed for, it was not obviously anything that had older people in mind.'

In addition to the nature of neighbourhood transitions, personal characteristics, experiences and histories also play a role in how older adults deal with discontinuities of place (Findlay and McLauglin, 2005). In a study on the experiences of housing renewal and forced relocation of older adults, for example, Ekstrom (1994) pointed out how role patterns established over the life course influenced whether an older person accepted or tried to influence their displacement process. And Peace et al. (2006, p. 66) noted that previous experiences of relocation inform older

² In the Netherlands in 2013, singles received a state pension of €1025 per month and cohabiting partners received €708 per person (SVB, 2013).

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