



Older people and outdoor environments: Pedestrian anxieties and barriers in the use of familiar and unfamiliar spaces



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ABSTRACT

A limited number of studies look at older people's use of space outside the 'home' environment, particularly unfamiliar, public urban space. Such unfamiliarity can be created through older people travelling as tourists to new areas; as a consequence of urban regeneration; or as a result of cognitive decline, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar. This paper explores the experiences of older people as pedestrians in unfamiliar urban spaces. It looks at two aspects: older people's spatial anxieties and the barriers (physical, psychological, spatial and social) they perceive and encounter in unfamiliar surroundings. Forty-four participants who took part in a reality cave exercise and a sub group of 10 people who visited an unfamiliar area as pedestrians describe their experience of walking a predetermined route. Given increasing urbanisation and population ageing this is an area of importance to geographers and gerontologists.

Our study showed that there are a number of barriers that are a concern for older people in new environments; these include poor signage, confusing spaces, poor paving and 'sensory overload' i.e. noise and complexity of the environment. Landmarks and distinctive buildings were more important to participants than signage in navigating unfamiliar areas. Such experiences can contribute to practice implications for planners in designing neighbourhoods to support older people. Small changes such as placing distance on clearly marked signage; giving further information about particular areas beyond the key tourist points and using landmarks as clear navigational aids are important. This paper also adds to the growing literature on geographical gerontology.

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1. Introduction

To date a limited number of studies look at older people's use of space outside the 'home' environment, particularly unfamiliar, public space in urban centres. Such unfamiliarity can be created through older people travelling as tourists to new areas; as a consequence of urban regeneration; or as a result of cognitive decline, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar. In this paper we address two research questions: What are the experiences of older people as pedestrians in urban environments, in relation to their use, orientation and perception of familiar and unfamiliar town settings, and secondly what barriers and anxieties within unfamiliar spaces (defined as new spaces to the older person or spaces which have be-

come unfamiliar) do they experience. This has significance for both the concept and policy of 'ageing in place' (Lawton, 1990) i.e. the physical location of the person being constant in the transaction between person and the environment, which has been a continuing basis for the social policy of ageing (Communities and Local Government, 2007). Increasing urbanisation and redevelopment of town and city centres, the growing population of older people living in urban areas and the projected rise in older people with dementia provided the rationale for the study of unfamiliar spaces.

The paper describes the mixed methods used in the study followed by a discussion of the findings from both quantitative and qualitative data. The paper argues that although older people may feel confident within familiar environments there are different types of barrier (for example physical, economic, cultural and social) that are a concern for older people, particularly when they experience new environments. The research goes some way towards understanding the triggers that may be involved in leading people to feel more or less comfortable with experiencing

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unfamiliar spaces as they grow older. Anticipation of feelings of discomfort may lead to a retreat into familiar spaces.

2. Environment and ageing

An understanding of how older people perceive and react to the spatiality of the built environment is an area of interest to environmental gerontologists as well as geographers of ageing or geographical gerontologists. Environmental issues within gerontology have traditionally concentrated on developing conceptual models to look at the dynamic between the competencies of the individual and the demands of the environment drawing on the psychological perceptions of the environment (Lawton et al., 1980; Wahl and Weisman, 2003). Although this development has been almost independent of the wider geographical literature of space, place and ageing the focus on the social, cultural, spatial and physical context has increasingly received attention (Holland et al., 2007; Andrews and Phillips, 2005). The social and experiential dimensions of place and ageing has drawn on the work of human geographers such as Rowles (1978, 1986), Rowles and Watkins (2003), Warnes (1982, 1990), Harper and Laws (1995), Andrews and Phillips (2005) and Andrews et al. (2007). Traditionally however the spatial study of ageing and later life has focused on the locational domains of the body, 'home', and residential care ignoring the complexity and diversity of how older people experience space and place in the built environment as they age (Del Casino, 2009). The literatures of both gerontology and geography have coalesced around issues such as 'ageing in place' (Rowles, 1978), place attachment (Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992), spatiality and age identity (Laws, 1997; Peace et al., 2006, 2011), care provision (Milligan and Wiles, 2010; Wiles, 2003; Phillips and Bernard, 2008); wellbeing, independence and mobility (Schwanen and Ziegler, 2011), rural services (Dwyer and Hardill, 2011), Mobility, migration and distance (Joseph and Hallman, 1998) and urbanisation (Phillipson et al., 2001; Scharf et al., 2003), all of which addresses more explicitly space and place. Yet there is considerable scope for further integration of gerontology and geography to understand the dynamics of the environment and ageing. Andrews et al. (2007) argue that geographical gerontology lacks a clear identity and profile with fractured debates between disciplines and call for a more nuanced approach to researching space and place and ageing.

An area of human geography – around pedestrianism – has entered the realm of those studying ageing and the built environment. The few studies that explore older people and pedestrianism are evident in public health geography literatures arguing that neighbourhood design influences physical activity, health and consequently independence. Functional impairments as well as inactivity levels can be exacerbated by environmental context in which older people live with more walkable neighbourhoods associated with promoting walking and healthier ageing (King et al., 2011; Wang and Lee, 2010). Our knowledge about the relationship between the physical environment and physical activity in older adults is however limited and inconsistent, relying often on standardised measures without an understanding of the behaviours, perceptions and meanings of space and place that link the outdoor environment and health (van Cauwenberg et al., 2011; Day, 2008) or go beyond the micro-environment of home (Vine et al., 2012). To some extent this has been addressed in a limited number of qualitative or mixed method studies combining a psychological and sociological perspective, looking at different environmental dimensions for example cleanliness, social interaction and peacefulness and their impact on health (Day, 2008); mobility and falls in the outdoor environment (IDGO); mobility and well being (Ziegler and Schwanen, 2011) and the impact of problems with traffic and pedes-

trian infrastructure on walkability (Vine et al., 2012). A further strand on the cultures and methods of pedestrianism can be found in the work of Lorimer (2011) and Middleton (2009). The latter argues that time and space are resources in people's everyday walking practices allowing for time to think and organise their household routines which helps shape their identity.

The study on which the paper is based took a distinctively multi-disciplinary view drawing on geography and social gerontology, spatial planning as well as psychology. Combining geographical and gerontological perspectives and using mixed methods we explore aspects of pedestrianism and the unfamiliar environment. Introducing the concept of unfamiliarity adds to both geographical and gerontological literatures. Discussions of age and place (such as place attachment, ageing in place) rely on a familiarity of place developed over a period of time. Schwanen et al. (2012) and Golant (2003) highlight the need for strengthening the theoretical development around domains such as spatio-temporality and we respond to this through the introduction of the concept of 'unfamiliarity'.

As people go through the life course their comfort and use of space changes (Rowles, 1978) due to: first, changes in their personal circumstances and physical/mental well-being, for example, changes in cognitive functioning some older people will experience unfamiliarity in their previously recognisable household surroundings (Setterstein, 1999). Second, as urban landscapes change through regeneration or decline, the use of space changes and previously familiar places may become unfamiliar. Unfamiliarity with one's location also occurs when the built environment is new; an experience encountered by increasing numbers of older people as they travel the world as tourists or relocate due to necessity or choice in later life. Unfamiliarity can lead to insecurity, disorientation, fear over personal safety, social exclusion and loss of independence. To maintain their self-respect and dignity, it is important to minimise the number of instances in which older individuals become 'lost' (Lynch, 1960; Ohta, 1983). Fear of disorientation deters older people from using public buildings (Foster et al., 1998), and appearance of uncertainty as they travel can earn the label 'confused' (Remnet, 1981). Enabling navigation and orientation in unfamiliar built environments is therefore essential to 'ageing in place' and the development of 'place attachment'.

Use of space and mobility may be restricted through disability, dependency and care needs or expanded through travel and leisure interests, migration and relocation (Regnier, 1976; Lawton et al., 1980). Social factors such as population density, crime rate and ethnic mix may also influence people's use and perception of space and their radius of activity (Phillipson et al., 2001; Scharf et al., 2003). The meaning and use of space will vary between older people depending on their biography and past experiences, and the extent to which they encounter new spaces alone or in the company of friends and family (Diehl and Willis, 2004; Rubinstein and de Medeiros, 2004). They may also adjust their use of space because of changes that occur in the environment – for example, changes in the physical features and users of public spaces. While most people will be aware of changes in the form and nature of the spaces they experience over time, there is little understanding of how reproduction of this background space affects older people in particular ways.

Although there are many studies on accessibility, there is less research on the impact and effects of architecture and town design on older people's usability, including their perception of the unfamiliar built environment. The research to date has concentrated on older people's use of familiar places, often their own 'home' (Rowles et al., 2004). Only recently has the research focus centred on a wider neighbourhood or city scale (Biggs and Tinker, 2007; Sugiyama and Ward Thompson, 2007) and looked at issues of spatiality in later life rather than exclusively on how the individual adapts to their environment. Considerable work has been undertaken in

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