Photovoicing the neighbourhood: Understanding the situated meaning of intangible places for ageing-in-place

Susan van Hees[a,b,*], Klasien Horstman[c], Maria Jansen[a,b], Dirk Ruwaard[a]

[a] Department of Health Services Research, Care and Public Health Research Institute (CAPHRI), Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, Maastricht University, P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands
[b] Academic Collaborative Centre for Public Health Limburg, Regional Public Health Service, Geleen, The Netherlands
[c] Department of Health Ethics and Society, Care and Public Health Research Institute (CAPHRI), Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, Maastricht University, P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Ageing-in-place is considered important for the health of older adults. In this paper, inspired by a constructivist approach to ageing-in-place, we unravel professionals' and older adults' constructions of ageing-in-place. Their perspectives are studied in relation to a policy that aims to develop so-called 'lifecycle-robust neighbourhoods' in the southern part of the Netherlands. We conducted a photovoice study in which 18 older adults (70–85 years) living independently and 14 professionals (social workers, housing consultants, neighbourhood managers and community workers) were asked to photograph and discuss the places they consider important for ageing-in-place. Based on a theoretically informed analysis of the data, we found that professionals primarily consider objective characteristics of neighbourhoods such as access to amenities, mobility and meeting places as important enablers for older adults to remain living independently. Analysis of older adults' photographs and stories show that they associate ageing-in-place with specific lived experiences and attachments to specific, intangible and memory-laden public places. We conclude that exploring these experiences helps to increase current knowledge about place attachment in old age.

1. Introduction

Place is considered increasingly important in ageing policies of Western welfare states. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2015) advises governments to encourage the development of age-friendly places, described as places that facilitate a healthy lifestyle, social participation and security. According to the WHO, providing age-friendly places will help people to age actively and thereby enhance their quality of life. Governments choose these approaches to confront the challenges of rapidly ageing societies and increasing healthcare expenditures (Menec et al., 2015). By increasing opportunities to remain living independently for longer, governments aim for people to remain healthier for longer. Although ageing-in-place is presented as a solution for governmental challenges, a great variety of studies on this topic over the past decades has demonstrated the complexities of the ageing-in-place processes (Andrews et al., 2007; Wiles et al., 2012). We studied the meanings of ageing-in-place in the development of so-called 'lifecycle-robust' neighbourhoods. These were introduced in a Dutch policy initiative, as a response to demographic trends and rising

costs of healthcare. Although the term 'lifecycle-robust' appears to be synonymous with the notion of 'age-friendly', and the current stress is on enabling ageing-in-place, the idea of lifecycle-robust neighbourhoods is that they enable people of all ages – from cradle to grave – to live there.

Studying the meaning of ageing-in-place, Wiles et al. (2012) demonstrate how ageing-in-place ideals as articulated in policy papers differ from those expressed by older adults. They argue that the phrase 'ageing-in-place' is not as fixed or transparent as assumed in policies. Most older people were not familiar with the term and some even had negative associations, like *'"being trapped" in a place without the ability to move'* (p. 360). Buffel et al. (2013) and van Hees et al. (2017) observed similar differences between policies and everyday practices. According to these authors, older adults' experiences of place were not heard by policymakers, and those living independently experienced difficulties in explaining why places matter to them. Buffel et al. (2014) concluded that older adults often abstain from participatory approaches concerning housing issues, neighbourhood design and planning, because they feel their voice is being neglected on these topics.

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* Correspondence to: Department of Health Services Research, Postbus 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, The Netherlands.
 E-mail addresses: s.v.vanhees@uvt.nl (S. van Hees), k.horstman@maastrichtuniversity.nl (K. Horstman), maria.jansen@ggdzl.nl (M. Jansen), d.ruwaard@maastrichtuniversity.nl (D. Ruwaard).

Kenkmann et al. (2017) compared perspectives of older adults and care professionals in care homes and found that professionals construct these homes primarily as workplaces, while the older adults who live there construct them as their homes. In addition, older adults expressed feeling more at home when they have greater autonomy and choice in how to use space, while professionals believed that elements such as order and cleanliness would contribute to a 'homely' environment. In studies exploring meanings of ageing-in-place among policymakers, professionals and older adults, very different perspectives and experiences come to the foreground.

Many studies on ageing-in-place already emphasise the importance of older adults' voices and discuss specific meanings given by them to places relating to place attachment versus barriers created by places (e.g. Kohon and Carder, 2014; Novek and Menec, 2014). Elements of ageing-in-place that are generally considered important are mobility, social relations, and the environment as enablers of mobility and social relations (e.g. the importance of benches on which to rest and as enablers of social interactions) (Gardner, 2011; Menec et al., 2011; Ottoni et al., 2016; Vogelsang, 2016). We want to advance the investigation of ageing-in-place by not only focusing on which constraints and regulators older adults recognise in their environment, but by also exploring how their constructions of ageing-in-place connect or interact with those of local professionals (social workers, housing consultants, neighbourhood managers and community workers) who translate ageing-in-place policies into daily practices. We therefore chose photovoice as an alternative method, to explore untold stories about place and to obtain insights into the experiences of older adults. Photovoice provided us with an opportunity to explore how older adults and professionals both construct ageing-in-place. It helped unravel lived *experiences* and stories that, according to Coleman and Kearns (2015), remain untold when relying only on interviews, because: '... "ageing-in-place" is not only a demographic or political issue but also an emotional and lived *experience* that inherently involves the broader place of residence'. In interviews, people expressed difficulties in elaborating why and how places matter to them. Photovoice provides participants with an opportunity to show instead of tell.

Below, we first sketch the theoretical background to this study and explain the constructivist approach used, which frames ageing-in-place as the situated dynamics of place attachment and sense of place. We then describe the methodology used in this ethnographic study and introduce our case, which involves the introduction of lifecycle-robust neighbourhoods, after which we present a visual analysis. Finally, we reflect upon the ways in which older adults and professionals visualise and share their perspectives, and discuss how these relate to prior discussions of place attachment and ageing-in-place.

2. Theorising ageing and place

Ageing-in-place has been thoroughly investigated and discussed within geography, public health and gerontology during the past decades. This notion closely relates to place attachment, which is elaborated below. First, we discuss two major approaches used to explore how older adults relate to place: (a) an empirical-rationalist approach and (b) a social-constructivist approach. Scholars using the first approach often draw on an ecological perspective (Lawton and Nahemow, 1973), focusing on an environment-person fit. They identify characteristics of place that optimise individual functioning. Tangible characteristics, such as proximity and access to amenities, mobility opportunities, security and attachment through personal items are demonstrated as important for ageing-in-place (e.g. Dahlin-Ivanoff et al., 2007; Eriksson and Emmelin, 2013; Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Ogg, 2014; Ottoni et al., 2016; Rowles, 1983, 1993; Peace, Holland and Kellaher, 2011; Plouffe and Kalache, 2010).

However, while 'objective' but static demographic, geographical and historical characteristics provide insight into meanings of place, this approach does not help to understand what specifically makes place meaningful for people when living there. In our study, inspired by Science and Technology Studies (STS) we draw on the social-constructivist approach that was introduced to understand *how* places become meaningful (Andrews et al., 2013; Gieryn, 2000; Milligan, 1998). This approach considers the meaning of place not as a sum of objective characteristics, but as a dynamic process in which meaning construction is situated and contingent upon historically shaped experiences. Place is not considered to be a static context, but an integral and meaningful part of peoples' social lives that is constructed by past experiences and desired futures (Andrews et al., 2007). STS is a discipline that studies how science, technology and society interact based on the idea that there is no activity that is not technologically mediated (Hackett et al., 2008). Places can be considered as such mediating technologies when they affect society and invoke relations between people using or relating to them. Accessibility, design and the stories people share about a place create meaning. A pub needs visitors, but subsequently visitors interpret the pub based on their experiences and through other users. Via this example, Gieryn (2000) explains how one pub had become a symbol for class distinction as it attracted the 'moneyed'. A constructivist approach to place points to the importance, not of objective characteristics as such, but to how places generate experiences, and how they enable people to connect to other people and thereby to place.

Constructivist studies first nuanced the idea that older adults all have a desire to remain in-place and demonstrated that ageing-in-place is also about agency and choice in how to use place (van Hoven and Douma, 2012). The maintenance of autonomy, independence, identity and feelings of belonging is crucial (Coleman et al., 2016: Heatwole-Shank and Cutchin, 2016; Peace et al., 2011; van Hoven and Douma, 2012). Stones and Gullifer (2016) studied the refusal of very old people to leave their homes. They found that being able to maintain one's home is not only important because the physical setting represents independence, but also because of an attachment to 'things, experiences, memories and expectations embodied therein' (p. 453). Through these experiences people develop collective identities, memories and histories, which create feelings of belonging and place attachment. This adds to Rowles's (1983) argument that place attachment is constructed by how people in everyday life talk about their life experiences in their environment. He argues that environments embody such experiences and can be called 'incident places'. In her study of collective and relational experiences of place, Degnen (2015) explains that by sharing memories and experiences of place the meaning of place continually changes.

Social-constructivist studies on meanings of ageing-in-place demonstrate how not only the home, but also places outside the home such as green (and blue) spaces, historical buildings, monuments, and opportunities for social interactions affect place attachment (Coleman and Kearns, 2015; Coleman Kearns and Wiles, 2016; Gardner, 2011; Wiles et al., 2012). Gardner (2011) studied how such public places can create opportunities to connect, to maintain connections and how places subsequently create feelings of belonging and a sense of community. In addition to home (*first places)* and work (*second places*), Gardner recognises the importance of so-called *third places*, which refer to somewhat open, public places (such as pavements, parks and squares) and public buildings (such as grocery stores, libraries, bars, restaurants and churches). These are places that offer opportunities for people to interact in diverse ways. Apparently, the simple everyday interactions invited by public places, such as observing, calling or waving to a neighbour, are of special importance in constructions of place attachment. In addition, Coleman and Kearns (2015) demonstrate how places do not necessarily need to be actively used to be meaningful. In their study of what ageing-in-place means for older adults living on an island, they give an example of an older woman who explains how she gets pleasure, meaning and satisfaction in her daily life from the view from her home. A man living on the same