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Processes of developing 'community livability' in older age☆

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ABSTRACT

Objective: 'Community livability' is a widely used term that is still under-conceptualized. The purpose of the project was to theorize key dynamics of livability for older adults who are aging in place in their homes and communities.
Methods: Twelve community-dwelling adults (70+) were recruited in a multiple-case study design. Interviews and naturalistic observations were used over the course of 6 months. Global positioning system (GPS) devices were used to generate maps (routines, routes, type and duration of activities) to elicit additional insights through interviews. We used grounded theory analysis.
Results: For older adults, livability is not experienced as the presence of amenities, but rather involves active and ongoing negotiation of physical and social dimensions of their communities. We identify three core processes of livability including *enacting an ideology of aging*, *building social infrastructure*, and *negotiating daily participation*. These three processes unfolded in varied ways, yet closely shaped—and were shaped by—the older adults' participation in their necessary and chosen daily activities.
Discussion: Community livability is a process that varies considerably from the current conceptualizations. Understanding and expanding livability considerations will have positive implications for older adults' well-being while aging in community settings.

Introduction

The concept of "livability" has been broadly and variously conceptualized by groups with an interest in increasing the health, quality of life, accessibility, or sustainability of a population or place. Ideally, a community that is livable would benefit residents of all ages and abilities (Partners for Livable Communities, 2010). However, the concept is uniquely relevant to older adults who are growing older in their own homes by choice or by necessity. Older adults may be vulnerable to changes in neighborhood demographics or safety (Yen, Michael, & Perdue, 2009), have an increased risk for social isolation (Rantakokko et al., 2014), and almost 4 in 10 experience some difficulty with basic activities of daily life (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010). While the home itself plays a critical role in an individuals' ability to sustain the functional dimensions of aging in place (Fänge & Ivanoff, 2009), dimensions of the community are also closely related to an older adults' engagement in meaningful and social activities (Scharlach & Lehning, 2013). It is no surprise that aspects of the community in which an older adult lives have been linked to general well-being in older age (Cheng, Rosenberg, Wang, Yang, & Li, 2011; Oswald, Jopp, Rott, & Wahl, 2011; Wahl, Fänge, Oswald, Gitlin, & Iwarsson, 2009). Linkages between community and individual well-being, however, are not well understood. Further, attempts to increase supports available to older adults in the community—or overall community "livability"—rarely take into consideration the great variation among older adults' experiences and needs (Lehning, Smith, & Dunkle, 2014).

Efforts to enhance livability for older adults include the 'Age-friendly community' projects (Plouffe & Kalache, 2011), the AdvantAge Initiative (Feldman & Oberlink, 2003), and other aging initiatives that have been piloted and promoted globally (Green, 2012; WHO, 2007). Findings from these studies identified various components of a community that contribute to supporting older adults. For example, Feldman and Oberlink (2003) reported that an elder-friendly community addresses basic needs, promotes social and civic engagement, optimizes physical and mental health and well-being, and maximizes independence for frail and disabled individuals. In 2005, the World Health Organization launched a project in 33 cities around the world to identify key features that promote active aging. However, topics to guide the focus groups were identified a priori from existing literature (e.g., AARP, 2012; New York, 2004).

Lui, Everingham, Warburton, Cuthill, and Bartlett (2009) concluded that the majority of evidence on age-friendly communities was from

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urban settings and took a descriptive approach. They highlighted the need for the description of processes, attention to the social nature of aging in the community, and empirical studies that reflect the real terms of people's lives. A common feature of many of these approaches to understanding and promoting community livability for an aging population is a heavy emphasis on the environment or context. Many researchers (e.g. Emlet & Moceri, 2012; Green, 2012; Menec, Means, Keating, Parkhurst, & Eales, 2011; Plouffe & Kalache, 2011) explicitly draw on Lawton and Nahemow's (1973) ecological perspective where 'fit' between person and environment represents optimal functioning. When research is grounded in this 'best fit' model, the line of inquiry tends to primarily focus on features of an environment (e.g. Andersson, 2011; Yang & Sanford, 2012) or on the characteristics of persons (e.g. Emlet & Moceri, 2012). Temporal and spatial processes are neglected, as are perspectives that foreground participation in daily life as an embodiment of a person-place relationship. Golant (2003) concluded that although Lawton and Nahemow's (1973) formulation of person-environment fit is still pervasive, it is not a sufficient foundation for the study of "holistic phenomena involving the confluence of people, space, and time" (p. 639). In contrast, we adopt a relational perspective where communities are not passive backdrops to peoples' social lives, but rather an integral and meaningful part (Andrews, Cutchin, McCracken, Phillips, & Wiles, 2007); the 'place' of aging is constantly changing through the actions and interactions of people, their past experiences, and their desired futures (Smith & Cartlidge, 2011).

Livability has been largely conceptualized as the presence, absence, or relative strength of discrete features in the physical or social context. There is little attention to how or whether these features translate into increased or extended well-being for individuals—or which individuals—aging in communities. In short, livability *as a process* has yet to be adequately conceptualized. To address that omission, this study was undertaken to develop a grounded theory of community livability for older adults, specifically attending to the relationship of older adults and the physical and social environments through which daily activities unfold.

Methods

To develop a grounded theory of community livability for older adults, an instrumental multiple case study design (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2005) was employed. This approach allowed a combination of depth of understanding livability processes with a breadth of older adults' situations in order to best theorize the process.

Setting

This study took place in a mid-sized metropolitan area in North Carolina. The location was selected for the racial and ethnic diversity, socioeconomic range, and the proportion of older adults living in the area. At the time of the study, 9.8% of the county population was older than 65 years (N.C. Department of Health & Human Services, 2012). The metropolitan area featured common urban characteristics such as a multimodal public transportation system, dense housing areas, mixed-zoning areas with housing and retail in close proximity, areas that were impoverished and/or had high crime rates, and publicly-funded efforts toward revitalization, as well as typically suburban or rural characteristics such as un-marked country roads, homes located on several acres of land, and cohesive but isolated neighborhoods that were not within walking distance of amenities.

Participants

Twelve older adults (70+) were purposively recruited. All participants were living in non-institutional home settings, left their homes at least 5 h per week, and did not have specific plans to relocate. Persons living in retirement communities or who were not cognitively able to engage in in-depth interviews were not included. Cases were selected to create variation by gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, and living situations, including housing type and location. This study was approved by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill IRB, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data collection

Using diverse methods is consistent with an instrumental approach to the cases, where a depth of understanding regarding a particular situation informs a broader issue (Stake, 2005). Three complimentary methods (naturalistic observations, interviews, and GPS-derived maps) were employed. Following initial contact and consent, data collection occurred in five stages.

First, a semi-structured interview was conducted, covering topics including residential history, daily routines, social networks, and participants' perceptions of livability. Interviews lasted an average of 90 min. Second, participants identified a regularly occurring activity such as running errands or attending a class for a participant observation. Observations ranged from 90 min to 3.5 h. Third, a semi-structured interview built on the activity observation. Questions covered topics including changes or challenges faced over time, unique or notable features of the community, and the personal significance of various activities. Interviews lasted approximately 80 min. Fourth, maps of community routines and locations were generated using portable global positioning system (GPS) devices. Participants carried a small (5 cm × 5 cm) GPS device for 10–14 days which recorded location information such as frequency, duration, time, and place of community activities and navigation. Participants were instructed to carry the GPS any time they left their home. All of the data were uploaded, and a map was generated. During a final interview, these maps were clarified and discussed with the participant. Interview questions explored the values and meanings associated with specific activities and explored participants' expectations for the future. Interviews lasted approximately 65 min.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author; transcriptions, fieldnotes, maps, and travel logs were compiled for each case and modified as needed (e.g., names of streets) for anonymity.

Analysis

This combination of methods was chosen in order to reveal patterns, experiences, and challenges of daily life that have not been represented in previous conceptualizations of community livability. Using personal activity maps in combination with qualitative data was designed as a mechanism to reveal tacit knowledge or taken-for-granted ways of engaging in daily life that might inform the concept of livability. Analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open and focused coding of all transcripts and naturalistic observation field notes were completed by the first author. Emerging ideas from the coding process were examined against the travel log and map data, and analytic memos served to integrate insights and draw out tensions among the data forms. For example, details from travel logs were used to interrogate the interview data; and rich description from the naturalistic observation helped to contextualize the navigation patterns within the purposes and values expressed by the participants. Memos and refined codes were expanded via comparison within and across cases, and both authors met regularly to review data and emerging concepts. Final categories, including the three processes presented in this paper, were shared with several participants for feedback and further refinement. Trustworthiness of data collection and analysis was fostered through incorporating multiple data types and multiple data sources, and by refining codes and categories during follow-up interviews with participants (Morrow, 2005). Reflexive journaling (Charmaz, 2006), consensus building among authors, and theoretical sampling for disconfirming cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) support the dependability of results presented here.