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Ageing research along the urban–rural distinction: old questions and new potential

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Challenges of ageing research along the urban–rural distinction

Research relating to the urban–rural distinction, frequently framed as a direct contrast between urban and rural regions, has yet to become a major pathway in gerontology and continues to be subject to considerable debate in relation to its status and outcomes. This can be attributed to several factors.

First, the urban–rural contrast approach is associated with numerous research design and methodology flaws (Golant 2004). This encompasses ongoing difficulties and incompatibilities arising from the definition of ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ areas—a situation which applies to research conducted within a single nation, but is compounded when cross-national comparisons are attempted. Further problems arise from an ongoing neglect to control for confounding variables, such as education and income, when seeking to identify ‘true’ and robust urban–rural differences. Going further still, the heterogeneity within urban and rural settings often appears to be so pronounced, even within individual nations, that a simplistic urban–rural contrast is unlikely to represent a very useful endeavour. Related to this, urban and rural settings represent moving targets. On the one hand, rural regions in many nations have changed dramatically—either to the better or to the worse—since the 1980s in relation to their economic and infrastructural development. On the other hand, long-term and ongoing changes in urban areas, including trends towards suburbanisation, the concentration and dominance of business areas and a diversity of city centres, have significantly affected the lives of older people in urban areas. Consequently, research on urban–rural issues and ageing dating from the 1970s and

1980s is probably no longer very helpful, and there is an urgent need to update the knowledge base in this field.

In the light of these considerations, it would appear that simple urban–rural contrasts relating to older people no longer provide convincing answers to the challenges in the field of gerontology. Instead, a more differentiated approach is demanded which focuses on specific urban or rural areas. This approach should be driven by important conceptual and societal questions, and by a desire to investigate—to draw upon a distinction suggested by Rowles and Watkins (2003)—the importance of spaces (in objective terms) and places (as the subjective, cognitive-emotional representation of objective space) as people age. This is the bottom line which can be identified in the collection of six papers echoing recent European research on urban and rural issues, brought together by Thomas Scharf as a special section of this issue of the *European Journal of Ageing* (EJA). I believe that this represents a major strength of the collection. Specifically, the papers by Scharf et al. (2005) and Oswald et al. (2005) provide differentiated views on ageing in specific urban settings in England and Germany, while the contributions of Burholt and Naylor (2005) and Mollenkopf and Kaspar (2005) develop in-depth contrasts of specific rural settings in England and Germany. The paper by Deeg and Thomése (2005) explores the role of discrepancies between income level and neighbourhood status for ageing outcomes and also relates person–environment discrepancy constellations to urban and rural regions in The Netherlands. Finally, Phillipson and Scharf (2005) provide an overarching conceptual argument which touches upon many of the key issues and developments in the field, not least globalisation and how this affects urban and rural ageing today and in the future.

A second major reason underlying the reluctance of contemporary gerontology to adopt the urban–rural distinction as a frame for conducting research concerns the cross-cutting nature of related research. The urban–rural divide may be perceived as being too broad an umbrella for investigating concrete empirical research

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questions. It appears that urban–rural research is primarily acknowledged as representing a valuable contribution within the sphere of applied gerontology—for example, when differences between older people in urban and rural settings in relation to service and health provision or nursing home admissions are the focus of analysis (Dwyer et al. 1990). The question of what the consideration of broad categories such as ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ adds to the fundamental understanding of ageing processes has, however, yet to generate an unequivocal response. As Golant (2004) has argued, the key conceptual research challenge behind this question is as follows: ‘Does the place one grows old in matter and does it matter more for some groups of older people than for others?’ (p. 280). This question also closely links urban–rural issues in ageing research to what is commonly labelled environmental gerontology, that is, a classic research sphere within gerontology which places special emphasis on context and person–environment interactions in the understanding of ageing processes and outcomes (e.g. Wahl 2001; Wahl et al. 2004).

Against this background, the six papers in the special section raise a number of expectations in terms of developing new conceptual and empirical answers to core questions of ageing research along the urban–rural distinction: What can be learned from the papers about the fundamental role of place as people age? Is the urban–rural distinction important in this regard? What insights are developed and what kind of knowledge may be classed as being new and innovative? How should future research be conceived in order to strengthen the case for urban–rural research in gerontology? In order to address these questions, the next section of this commentary introduces a frame of reference which can be used to consider similarities and differences between the papers. This is followed by a section which provides a more differentiated view of the potential offered by each paper. In the concluding section, an attempt is made to answer the above questions based on what has been learned from the papers in the preceding steps.

Developing a frame of reference: perspectives from environmental gerontology

Given that each paper in the special section can be seen as operating in the interaction sphere of the person and the environment, a series of critical issues arising from the perspective of environmental gerontology will serve in the following as a means of further qualifying the papers’ contributions. Wahl and Lang (2004) have recently summarised the shortcomings of, and perceived future needs relating to environmental gerontology research and to other areas of gerontology closely associated with person–environment interactions (such as dealing with the role of social relations as people age). A central feature of their argument is that the widely held separation of the material–physical from the social environment must be overcome, and that the two

spheres should become more closely integrated. In addition, Wahl and Lang (2004) argue in their Social–Physical Over Time Model (SPOT) that in both the social and physical spheres of person–environment interaction, reference to two fundamental processes may help to improve understanding of change in person–environment relations as people age: social–physical agency and social–physical belonging. Social–physical agency refers to ageing individuals’ attempts to use and actively shape both material–physical and social resources in order to achieve important life goals. By contrast, social–physical belonging represents a goal in its own right, nurtured primarily by long-term attachment to places. Additionally, while social–physical agency is assumed to decrease as adults move from midlife to old and particularly very old age, social–physical belonging is assumed to become increasingly important from middle to old age and, particularly, very old age.

A further feature of SPOT is the way in which it strongly emphasises a classic theme of environmental gerontology, i.e. the concept of person–environment fit (or misfit). The basic assumption of this concept is that consideration of person-related or environment-related characteristics alone provides an inadequate basis for understanding interindividual differences in outcomes such as health, autonomy or well-being. Instead, it is assumed that competencies and needs of ageing individuals are supported by or can be threatened by existing person–environment constellations, and that matches or mismatches of personal and environmental resources add substantially to the understanding of such interindividual differences in ageing outcomes (Carp 1987). This view is also driven by the assumption of environmental gerontology that vulnerability to environmental characteristics represents a fundamental feature of the ageing process and, because of this, the consideration of the environment is crucial for any research approach to ageing (e.g. Lawton 1983; Wahl 2001).

Research along the urban–rural distinction may be regarded as being particularly useful in terms of the challenges of environmental gerontology as channelled in the SPOT model and other environmental gerontology work. This is because it is quite clear that the dynamics and tensions underlying the urban–rural contrast are substantially driven by objective and/or perceived physical dimensions and characteristics (such as remoteness or closeness to family members, friends, services and cultural facilities; housing characteristics; public transportation options; experience of attachment to place) as well as by objective and/or perceived social-cultural dimensions and characteristics (such as the nature of family relations, social contact options, different cultures of social contact and mutual support). In addition, the urban–rural distinction may have particular potential to sharpen and differentiate our understanding of the fundamentals of age, space and place relations. For example, the interwoven nature of the physical and social environment may differ between

urban and rural environments. While living arrangements in the urban context are becoming increasingly 'singularised', with social interaction taking place out of the home environment, some rural settings still seem to nurture place experiences of ageing persons closely linked to their family members in multi-generation households. Going further, the age trajectories assumed in the SPOT model of social-physical agency and belonging may operate differently in urban and rural regions. For example, it could well be that the decrease of agency and increase of belonging is slowed down in urban compared to rural older people, because the maintenance of agency is more important in the urban context as a way of preserving one's day-to-day functioning, autonomy and well-being.

Against this background, it is particularly noteworthy that all papers in the special section in one way or another support the notion that the material-physical and social-cultural environment cannot be isolated, and that an integrated view of both is needed in order to improve understanding of the role of place in older people's lives. For example, to take the study by Scharf et al. (2005), the interwoven reality of low material resources operating with low social resources is a major facet of what has been coined by the authors as social exclusion closely related to deprived urban settings. In their paper, Burholt and Naylor (2005) underpin the notion that place attachment of older people in rural areas is nurtured and experienced differently by diverse mixes of physical-spatial and social-cultural environmental features such as retirement communities or archetypal Welsh communities. In their analysis of the role of different urban districts, Oswald et al. (2005) also emphasise that matching the needs of elders with the objective resources of different urban settings requires a combined view which encompasses, for example, the availability of a good housing standard or of greenery in the close surrounding, and experienced social support from family, friends and neighbours.

All the papers also add in one sense or another to the understanding of person-environment fit or misfit processes as people age in a diversity of urban and rural contexts. This is addressed, for instance, in approaches as diverse as ageing in deprived environments (Scharf et al. 2005), emerging discrepancies between personal income and neighbourhood status across the life course (Deeg and Thomése 2005), and compatibility between environment-related needs and reality (Oswald et al. 2005). In sum, all of the papers support the view that place matters, and that matches or mismatches echoed in a diversity of person-environment constellations are related to key outcomes of ageing.

A closer look at the papers

In this section, I will primarily refer to the special section's empirical papers. However, I will return to Phillipson and Scharf's (2005) conceptual work in the

closing section of the commentary. The contribution of Scharf et al. (2005) deepens our understanding of issues related to person-environment fit and misfit in the urban environment by taking the extreme of very deprived urban areas. The more general point inherent in the paper is that cities as 'engines of innovation'—as engines of population, attitude, and value diversity and as engines driving physical, spatial and mental mobility—may lead to severe person-environment mismatches when it comes to ageing well in such contextual dynamics. This is also a key point highlighted by Phillipson and Scharf (2005) in their conceptual paper. With a certain degree of overstatement, one might even argue that an environment planned to remain in ongoing and rather rapid change as part of its deepest post-modern or post-post-modern identity simultaneously represents a major threat to the need for continuity, the maintenance of physical, spatial and mental meaning, and long-term place attachment prevalent predominantly in old and very old people. What are the outcomes of these dynamics for older people? Deprived urban areas probably represent those person-environment interfaces in which the disadvantage and social exclusion of older people appear most visibly. And we can see this only when we take a closer look at this, as Scharf et al. (2005) have done. Such social exclusion operates on different levels covering material resources, social relations, civic activities, basic services and neighbourhood issues. Taking the major categories of the SPOT model, social exclusion may also be understood as being nurtured by constraining processes in terms of social-physical agency *and* social-physical belonging as people pass from young to old and very old age. Probably, the exertion of agency is already rather inhibited in socially excluded persons in young age, due to pronounced limitations in material resources. In addition, the desire to belong, regarded as particularly crucial in old and very old age, may be subject to considerable threat in deprived areas due to feelings of insecurity and unpredictable, rapid negative changes which might occur in one's neighbourhood. In such a situation, negative quality of life outcomes in physical and mental health terms are highly probable.

The contribution of Oswald et al. (2005) focuses on a 50- to 80-year-old sample taken from three urban districts in the city of Heidelberg, and is driven by a 'complementary-congruence model' as a means of considering person-environment fit processes. In addition, emphasis is put on outdoor place attachment as a way of better understanding ageing in different urban settings. Given that person-environment fit processes have not been subject to much empirical attention since the early work in nursing homes of Eva Kahana's research group (e.g. Kahana 1982), it is important that the paper provides a coherent attempt to operationalise environmental fit. This draws on a combination of assessed individual needs and the presence of objective environmental features which can enable individuals to fulfil these needs. A key distinction is made between more

basic and higher-order needs. The former set of needs is echoed in living environment characteristics such as size, the absence of barriers, and access to the street, public transportation, and shops and services. The latter set of needs is reflected in features such as a scenic view, living in an area with greenery, and the presence of cultural facilities in the home's surrounding neighbourhood. A strong main effect of district in the higher-order need person–environment fit domain was observed with higher fit in the more economically advantaged districts, while chronological age was only of minor importance. By contrast, person–environment fit in the more basic domain rather consistently increases with age, while district did not play a major role. Of interest with respect to the prediction of outdoor place attachment is that no single indicator from the diversity of domains (including socio-demographics, health, and the person–environment fit indicators) played a statistically meaningful role in all three districts. Taken together, the major message of this paper seems to be that a complex dynamic between individual ageing, existing person–environment fit dynamics, the general socio-economic status of the district, and more general attachments to place deserves consideration. Furthermore, attachment to place probably gains significantly in importance when relocation in the situation of frailty is to be considered. This adds even greater complexity to the full explanation of the role and consequences of all of these factors and their changing relation over time.

In their contribution, Deeg and Thomése (2005) add another major research avenue to the set of papers. They re-emphasise the need to consider simultaneously the ageing person and his or her specific neighbourhood context in order to better understand outcomes, in this case in the health domain. Among the strengths of the study—based on the rich material of the Longitudinal Ageing Study Amsterdam (LASA)—is a focus on the two seemingly straightforward variables of personal income and neighbourhood status. The paper shows, however, that the combination of such variables can generate quite complex contrasts. Two situations of pronounced mismatch, i.e. low income in high-status neighbourhoods and high income in low-status neighbourhoods, were compared with matched constellations, that is, low income in low-status neighbourhoods and high income in high-status neighbourhoods. It is also worth noting that the authors regard these constellations as being linked to different life course trajectories. For example, neighbourhoods may deteriorate over time, and relatively high personal income and the social-cultural self-perceptions associated with this could become increasingly discrepant with the 'outside' world. At the same time, attachment to place or, to adopt the term of the SPOT model, social–physical belonging becomes increasingly important and, as a consequence, the possibility of relocation is highly unlikely. At least three important messages emerge from this study. First, discrepant constellations, as theoretically postulated, actually occur fairly frequently. Second, there is a rela-

tion regarding the urban–rural differentiation: the low income and high-neighbourhood status constellation occurred more often in rural settings, while the reverse was true for the high income in low-neighbourhood status category. Third, mismatches are related to negative mental and physical health outcomes. The study also makes a significant contribution to the broader concept of person–environment fit, particularly in its use of clear-cut and easy to assess variables relating to the person and the environment (such as income and neighbourhood status). In other words, it may be a good idea to add an approach to the person–environment fit literature which adopts clearly circumscribed person and environmental variables. The environmental epidemiology tradition underlying the Deeg and Thomése (2005) paper may offer a sound basis for further exploring this dimension in future research.

Burholt and Naylor (2005) provide an impressive analysis of the need to develop a conceptually driven differentiation of place attachment within rural areas. In particular, their contribution offers empirical evidence that attachment to place is an important element of the personal experience of ageing in everyday life, and therefore also an important ageing research goal. A key message is that place attachment issues should not only be considered in the simplistic way of high versus low (or more versus less). Instead, there is a profound need to consider a diversity of place attachments covering general locational satisfaction, historical perspectives, social integration, appropriateness of the environment, aesthetics and emotional components of location, social support and relocation constraints. Also important is that the paper, to my knowledge for the first time, provides empirical data which can illuminate such a differentiated approach. Underlying the study's analyses, many of the fundamental complexities associated with 'negotiating' person–space and person–place relations as people age emerge rather more clearly than has been the case in previous research. A diversity of needs is probably driving these processes. Finding an 'adequate' place to live out one's remaining years of life and dealing with these diverse needs requires consideration of both the person side and what spaces (which may or may not become places) can offer to fulfil these needs. As a consequence of such attempts to secure a person–environment fit, place attachment develops in distinctive ways in different person–environment constellations related to different types of location, illustrated by Burholt and Naylor (2005) with data gathered in North Wales, UK. Based on these data, it appears that place attachment is not a uniform process, and different forms of place attachment are perhaps important in developmental processes across the adult lifespan from middle adulthood to old and very old age. As a consequence, the study also potentially provides an opportunity to develop a new means of exploring the process of social–physical belonging.

The Mollenkopf and Kaspar (2005) paper is driven by the argument that continuing differences between

East and West Germany, 10 years after re-unification, can best be detected in a contrast of rural areas located in the east and west. The study's strength is the breadth of variables used for comparison purposes, ranging from health-related data (such as ADL and cognitive performance) to well-being (e.g. positive and negative affect) and many other indicators widely acknowledged as important for quality of life in older age. Although the paper's empirical approach does not directly address the issue of person-environment fit, the general tendency found in different areas such as housing, leisure activities and outdoor-related attitudes and activities supports the notion that significant person-environment misfits still exist amongst older people living in rural areas of eastern Germany. For example, while elders in the east regard themselves as being significantly more outdoor oriented than their western counterparts, those in the west actually report more outdoor activities. This can probably be attributed to the continued lack of environmental opportunities for outdoor activities in eastern rural areas. Moreover, the analyses that adopt life satisfaction as the dependent variable underpin the assumption that such misfit adds to the explanation of individual differences in life satisfaction, particularly in the eastern rural sample. In sum, this paper offers another line of insights that person-environment fit or misfit is related to quality of life in older age, and that this operates differently in different socio-physical settings. Although nation-specific, the natural experiment of German re-unification thus has the potential to set person-environment issues within a historical-political context. This is important for the understanding of ageing from both the micro- and macro-perspectives, and represents one of the traditional challenges in the field of gerontology.

Conclusion

This commentary raised in its first section a set of questions related to this EJA issue's special section. In the concluding part of the commentary, and nurtured by a consideration of the key issues raised by the papers in the previous sections, I will use these questions as a way of organising some final thoughts on the papers' potential and to reflect on a number of open questions. The first question addressed the papers' contribution to knowledge about the fundamental role of place as people age. As I have tried to show in my review of the empirical papers, I believe that this body of work has substantially strengthened the assumption that place matters for the course and outcome of ageing. On the one hand, readers can learn a lot from the papers about person-environment processes in both objective and subjective terms. The major theme here is the better and more differentiated understanding of person-environment fit processes, which relied on a wide range of methodological strategies to assess person-environment match or mismatch. On the other hand, the finding that

taking place seriously can add to the explanation of differences in quality of life outcomes also has a major scientific as well as practical dimension. An ongoing shortcoming in the field is the lack of longitudinal data which could add weight to this important message. For example, the findings reported by Deeg and Thomése (2005) may be further informed by using additional measurement points available in LASA. This would also deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying income and neighbourhood discrepancies, and the long-term consequences of related mismatches. The findings of such an analysis might then also inform a major practical question linked to the place matters argument: could systematic improvement of person-environment constellations succeed in reducing the vulnerabilities of very old persons? In principle, I believe that this could really happen (one need only consider the impact of home adaptations or of improved public transportation). However, a number of papers in the special section have also made it very clear that such improvement cannot be achieved by relying on objective data alone; instead, place attachment and data on perceived environment deserve equal consideration in prevention, health intervention and community planning processes. For example, it could well be that many older people living in deprived neighbourhoods nevertheless feel quite attached to their place of residence and do not perceive their life as being disadvantaged or in need of improvement.

The next question concerned whether the urban-rural distinction represents an important pathway which can lead to an improved understanding of person-place relations and their outcomes. In this regard, it is worth emphasising that a major strength of this collection of papers has been the absence of direct urban-rural comparisons, and thereby the avoidance of many pitfalls related to such a general approach. Instead, we learned much about the need to differentiate within the broad categories of urban and rural settings. This approach has the advantage of rendering the diversity within both the urban and rural realms more transparent. However, such a strategy has the shortcoming that the ability to generalise findings, even within a single country, appears limited. In this vein, it is also a pity that urban-rural issues related to Eastern Europe were not addressed in any of the papers. Also, it could well be that there may be greater diversity in environmental contexts in Europe than in other industrialised regions of the world, raising questions about what this means for the generalisability of findings. Additionally, further overarching conceptual work is required in order to develop more theory-driven ideas relating to the kind of sub-settings which should be selected within the urban and rural world in order to address questions of relevance to ageing in place. In this regard, a renewed focus on theoretical development may also provide a means of addressing the emerging generalisation challenge, when quite specific areas in urban or rural regions become the focus for empirical analysis. In any case, the urban-rural

distinction also seems to provide a helpful device to frame questions related to fundamental processes concerning post- and post-post-modernity processes, globalisation, and how this affects ageing. This family of critical issues is addressed in depth in Phillipson and Scharf's (2005) conceptual contribution to the special section.

A further question sought to establish what insights are developed in the papers, and what kind of knowledge may be classed as being new and innovative. In this respect, the key point is that the papers have made a valuable contribution to the empirical revitalisation of the concept of person–environment fit or misfit, i.e. to an old but empirically under-researched concept in gerontology. In particular, and this brings us to the final question regarding how future research should be conceived in order to strengthen the case for urban–rural research in gerontology, the papers have the potential to encourage future empirical work on this issue and to channel such work in a new, cross-fertilising research programme. This would be of general importance, given the strong tendency in gerontology to opt ‘only’ for a person-centred approach and thereby de-contextualise the ageing process. The potential of person–environment issues in ageing research driven by the urban–rural distinction beyond the empirical data presented here is also convincingly represented in Phillipson and Scharf's (2005) conceptual paper. Moreover, urban–rural research in gerontology has the potential to provide a firm foundation for the ongoing development of interdisciplinarity in gerontology. This is a field in which the different methodological approaches of environmental psychology, social geography, urban–rural sociology, and environmental epidemiology can generate new synergies. Taken as a whole, the set of papers in this special section makes a substantial contribution to this area. From this perspective, the papers could also be read as an invitation to gerontologists to strive for greater interdisciplinarity in relation to theory, method and empirical research. The urban–rural distinction could become a major driving force of such a strategy.

The powerful messages which emerge from the empirical and theoretical material gathered in this collection suggest the need to develop a new research programme linked to a major empirical study (or a set of related studies) at a European level—a point also made by Phillipson and Scharf (2005). While such a programme might currently represent a dream, this EJA issue's special section clearly demonstrates the capacity in European ageing research to make this dream come true in the hopefully not too distant future.

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