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Moving Beyond ‘Aging In Place’ to Understand Migration and Aging: Place Making and the Centrality Of Occupation

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Abstract

‘Aging in place’ has become a key conceptual framework for understanding and addressing place within the aging process. However, aging in place has been critiqued for not sufficiently providing tools to understand relations or transactions between aging and place, and for not matching the diversity of contemporary society in which people are moving between and across nations more than ever before. In this article, the authors draw from concepts of place and migration that are becoming increasingly visible in occupational science. The concept of ‘aging in place’ is critically examined as an example of an ideal where the understanding of place is insufficiently dynamic in a context of migration. The authors suggest that the concept of place making can instead be a useful tool to understand how occupation can be drawn upon to negotiate relationships that connect people to different places around the world, how the negotiated relations are embedded

within the occupations that fill daily lives, and how this process is contextualized and enacted in relation to resources and capabilities.

Keywords

Migration; Immigration; Culture; Theory; Aging; Place

Migration is by definition about people moving from one place to another; in other words experiencing new and changing relations to places. In an era of globalization, people are travelling more than ever, emigrating, immigrating, or simply seeing the socio-cultural landscape of their neighborhood change as people move in and out of an area. Following globalization trends, there are also increasing numbers of people who are growing older and who have experienced migration. These various transitions in and out of place require continuous sensemaking and reconnections with familiar and unfamiliar places in everyday life (Phillipsson, 2007). This dynamism in everyday life requires revisiting of the conceptual frameworks underpinning research. Moreover, international migration can entail a complex re-negotiation of place, occupation, and identity to a greater extent than migration within one's country, given that it can entail dealing with different customs and languages, altered beliefs regarding ageing and the roles of ageing people in society, changed access to welfare and social resources, transnational relationships, and new forms of mixed or transnational identities (Bozic, 2006; Lewis, 2009; Patterson, 2006). The relevance of deepening the conceptual knowledge of migration within occupational science is to understand how people, in global contexts, relate and connect to different places around the world through daily occupations, something Zemke (2004) referred to as issues of "occupatio-spaciality" (p. 612). Moreover, an explicit focus on occupation in migration research would foreground that people, including migrants, move to-and-from geographical points on a map, where these places are imbued with the personal meaning of engaging in particular local occupations.

The authors represent an international and interdisciplinary research group, and will draw primarily on international immigration for the purpose of clarity in illustration. However, the authors assert that ideas developed in this article can be applicable to cases of domestic migration as well. Additionally, the authors hope that these ideas can contribute to opening up dialog as well as understanding of how people engage with places through aging processes and the centrality of occupation within such engagement and processes.

The aims of this article are first to critically examine the concept of 'aging in place' as an example of an ideal where the concept of place is insufficiently dynamic in the context of migration, and secondly to present a conceptual argument for addressing place, in the context of migration, as something dynamically created through the doing of occupations, rather than place as a static geographical location.

Demarcating the Concept of 'Aging in Place'

A growing body of research has connected spaces and places in later life with concepts such as quality of life, health, and well-being, as well as a sense of safety, social relationships,

social support, identity, and independence (Becker, 2003; Lewis, 2009; Peace, Holland, & Kellaher, 2011; Rowles, 1991; Wiles et al., 2009). In turn, place has increasingly become a gerontological research focus as well as a policy focus in addressing aging populations.

Aging in place has become a key conceptual framework for understanding and addressing place within the aging process. Indeed, aging in place, often defined as involving staying in the same or a familiar place over a sustained period of time, has been held as a policy ideal over the past decade, and places have been variously defined to encompass neighbourhoods, community attributes, and social affiliations (Black, 2008; Means & Evans, 2011). From both a policy and gerontological perspective, equating aging in place with aging at home is positioned as positive in that it meets the presumed desire of the majority of ageing people to stay in the homes in which they have lived a sustained portion of the lives (Peace et al., 2011; Wiles, Leibling, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2011). These ideas have been incorporated in research agendas and national policies, such as in Canada, United Kingdom, United States, and Sweden in order to improve supportive services for older people (Black, 2008; Cristoforetti, Gennai, & Rodeschini, 2011; Henning, Ahnby, & Osterstrom, 2009; Hwang, Cummings, Sixsmith, & Sixsmith, 2011; McDonough & Davitt, 2011).

Overall, aging in place is demarcated by its foci on the maintenance of continuity, place attachment, the maximization of independence, and the optimization of person-environment fit (Black, 2008; Cristoforetti et al., 2011; Cutchin, 2003; Lewis, 2009; McDonough & Davitt, 2011; Wiles et al., 2011). For example, the focus on continuity as beneficial in the lives of the elderly has persisted within gerontological studies since the inception of continuity theory in the 1960s and 1970s. This theory, based within a life cycle or development perspective that assumes various phases of the life are associated with various socio-psychological needs, proposed that ageing persons “have the need and the tendency to maintain the same personalities, habits and perspectives that they have developed over their life course” (Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003, p. 15). Aging in place extends this presumed need for continuity to place, a continuity which is essentially de-stabilized within the process of migration and which needs to be questioned as an ideal within an increasingly global world.

Place and Aging in a Global World

In response to the consequences associated with aging in a global world, research is increasingly attending to retirement migration as well as to the increasing numbers of aging labour migrants and refugees who are aging in another place than ‘their place of origin’. A large body of research on retirement migrations tied to seasonal, financial, and amenity-seeking factors have contributed better understandings of the role of place in the aging process (Haas, Bradley, Longino, Stroller, & Serow, 2006; Innes, 2008; Warnes, Friedrich, Kellaher, & Torres, 2004). However, given the conceptual and policy prominence given to aging in place, such retirement migrations are often taken as presenting problems or challenges to achieving a positive sense of place attachment, as well as place integration or social inclusion.

Comparatively less research has focused on lived experiences among individuals who migrate earlier in life and then age, than on those who make international moves in later life (Becker, 2003; Innes, 2008; Lewis, 2009). This lack of attention is particularly concerning as it has been suggested that “aged labour migrants include some of the most disadvantaged and socially excluded of Western Europe’s and North America’s older people” (Warnes, 2011, p. 393). In addition, ageing refugees, who may experience significant trauma in their home countries and during their relocation process, may face additional marginalization upon migration and “may feel only a marginal sense of belonging and that they are ageing out of place” even after being in a country for many years (Lewis, 2009, p. 376). Moreover, existing research on aging labour migrants and older refugees tends to focus on specific care situations (Emami, Torres, Lipson, & Ekman, 2000; Heikkilä, Sarvimäki, & Ekman, 2007) and culturally specific values and perceptions related to ageing (Torres, 2006; Warnes et al., 2004), reflecting a continued biomedical focus on the problematics of the aging process and a static view on ethnicity and culture.

Although such studies have contributed important knowledge about experiences of ageing and specific challenges in care situations in the context of ageing and immigration, in some cases this has led to a picture of older immigrants as passively defined by their cultural background and as dependent care recipients. These research foci and framing of older immigrants as culturally static, dependent and struggling to connect in new places have also had consequences for service provisions. For example, studies conducted in Swedish contexts show that services provided to older immigrants are often based on, and also confirm, negative stereotypes of older immigrants as passive and problematic (Brodin, 2006; Lill, 2007).

Overall, research on migration in aging, implicitly or explicitly informed by aging in place, often starts from an assumption that discontinuity in place is essentially problematic with aging. As such, much of this research does not fully attend to the ways in which place may be actively negotiated in ways that sustain well-being and identity throughout the aging process, nor to the ways in which aspects of systems and structures may support or detract from such negotiations. Moreover, such research has neglected how occupations are involved in creating a sense of place. In the following section, the insufficiency of aging in place as a conceptual lens to further understand how place is experienced and negotiated through occupations among aging migrants is highlighted. Following a critique of the limitations of the key demarcating characteristics of the concept of aging in place, examples of innovative research on later life migration that have pushed beyond a focus on the need for continuity and explore how place is negotiated are provided, to further demonstrate the need for a re-conceptualization of place.

The Insufficiency of ‘Aging in Place’

As noted above, aging in place has often lead to a narrow conceptualization of the ideal place for aging, often focussed on supporting aging within the physical spaces of one’s current home for as long as is possible (Henning et al., 2009; Hwang et al., 2011; Wiles et al., 2011). In turn, aging in place has been critiqued in general for not sufficiently providing tools to understand relations or transactions between aging and place, as well as how

occupation is embedded within such transactions (Cristoforetti et al., 2011; Cutchin, Dickie, & Humphry, 2006; Wiles et al., 2011). Of more specific concern in the study of aging and migration, the presumed stability or continuity of place, desire to stay in place, and place attachment to a long-term home underlying aging in place might not resonate in the lives of those who have experienced migration. In reference to this idea, Becker (2003) wrote: “Thrust into a different world, these elders are forced to create a new kind of place in the world for themselves” (p. 144). This challenges the ideas of continuity underlying the ideology of aging in place.

Both continuity theory in general, and aging-in-place specifically, have been critiqued for failing to consider the dynamic nature of ageing that requires ageing individuals to continually negotiate change in their relation to place, as well as engage in narrative reconstruction to create a sense of continuity of past, present and future (Cutchin, 2003). Furthermore, the presumed normativity of the desire for continuity, or sameness, as a ‘typical’ part of the later part of the life course is itself questionable, given critiques of life course approaches, which point to their embeddedness within particular Western systems of thought and values and their failure to address the heterogeneity of ageing persons in relation to culture, gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location, health and other characteristics (Estes, 2004). In a similar fashion, the prioritization of independence as a marker of ‘successful’ ageing has also pervaded gerontological theory, including the concept of aging in place.

Within occupational science and other disciplinary areas, the focus on independence as a necessary aspect of healthy ageing has also been questioned, in relation to its cultural transferability, its political functions in individualizing the problems of ageing, and its neglect of the ways dependency in later life is socially constructed (Cardona, 2008; Dickie, Cutchin, & Humphry, 2006; Laliberte Rudman, 2006; Torres, 2001). Indeed, given the cultural diversity associated with later life migration, the valuing of independence, particularly as embodied via living alone in later life, may not be commensurate with the values and cultural modes of living arrangements for later life that are familiar to migrants from contexts outside the ‘West’ (Lewis, 2009). In relation to emphases on person-environment fit, ‘aging in place’ has been critiqued for promulgating a static view of place as a pre-existing ‘container’ existing apart from ageing persons, rather than as a process that involves continual transactions between space and ageing persons that transform both (Cristoforetti et al., 2011; Cutchin, 2003; Wiles et al., 2011).

Encompassing the ideology of continuity and aging in place, older persons’ relationship with place has often been addressed in terms of ‘place attachment’, referring to an emotional and habitual attachment to place through long term relationships with a specific place. Place attachment has been widely used in connection to ‘the meaning of home’ in the context of aging in place (Rowles et al., 2003). Contributing important knowledge on the meanings older people attribute to their homes, this research had tended to overlook meaning-making processes by regarding attachment to place as static and intrinsic to the older persons. Additionally place attachment can be critiqued for picturing home and aging in place as a romantic ideal, overlooking the complexity in older persons’ relationships to their home that can include mixed emotions and problematic situations. The concept of place attachment

particularly fails to embrace how older persons with experiences of migration continuously negotiate relationships to multiple places.

Studies exploring experiences among elder migrants provide a particularly tangible illustration of the inadequacy of thinking in terms of aging in place. For example, Becker (2003) conducted a 10-year long qualitative study with 211 older immigrants living in an inner city in the United States. Becker highlighted how these older immigrants actively worked to lessen their sense of displacement through activities that connected their past and present experiences of home and community, and how this work was compounded by problematic conditions associated with aging, poverty and lack of residential stability.

In another study, Lewis (2009) conducted long-term ethnographic research with 38 elderly Cambodian refugees in a rural community in the United States. Lewis found that these elders struggled with a sense of displacement and being liminal, resulting from dealing with issues such as unfamiliar customs, limited language skills, restricted mobility, limited financial resources, restricted access to health care, and the changing living arrangements of younger generations. As well, in the absence of everyday cultural patterns of activity, partly due to the absences of spaces for such activities, the elders discussed facing challenges in meeting their culturally-shaped expectations for what they thought they should be doing, such as visiting friends and families, spending time in the temple and passing on traditions to younger generations. Lewis also found that these elders actively and continually attempted to create and re-create a sense of place through integrating elements from their past and present within their everyday activities and places.

These two studies highlight the need to consider the ways in which occupation is drawn upon to negotiate place, and point to the need for research on aging and migration to move beyond conceptualizations of place aligned with aging in place. The importance of broadening conceptualizations of place, and attending to the intersections of occupation and place in the processes of migration is further illustrated by occupational science work that has attended to migration at earlier points in the lifespan.

Occupational Science and Migration: Dynamic Conceptualizations of Place and Occupation

Similar findings pertaining to active efforts to navigate or negotiate place, often through occupation, are echoed within occupational science addressing migration. Culminating in this issue of the *Journal of Occupational Science*, concepts of place and migration have been increasingly visible in the field during the past few years (Hon, Sun, Suto, & Forwell, 2011; Huot & Rudman, 2010; Kumar, 2011; Nayar, Hocking, & Giddings, 2011; Rowles, 2008). Much of this scholarship has dealt with particular occupations of migrant groups or more broadly occupations as mediating devices in the process of migration. Moreover, a historically individualistic perspective within the discipline has been critiqued in favor of seeing occupations as part of collective orchestrations and inseparable from contexts, something drawn upon in migration literature within occupational science (Cutchin, Aldrich, Bailliard, & Coppola, 2008; Dickie et al., 2006; Frank, 2011; Nayar & Hocking, 2006; Nayar et al., 2011).

In their study of migrant Indian women in New Zealand, Nayar, Hocking, and Giddings (2011) described ways in which the women “navigated cultural spaces” (p. 5). Nayar et al. described this negotiation as experiences of moving between one’s Indian heritage while also trying out new senses of self within the New Zealand contexts. This process of facing challenges in a new host country or trying to assimilate or integrate new ways of doing things is something that has been discussed for many decades. However, Nayar et al. illustrated nuances of how these processes begin to unfold over time and within different cultural spaces such as the public, private, and performative customs of different country contexts. This discussion adds to an understanding of how everyday occupations such as meal preparation and occupations involving social relations impact upon experiences of migration, as well as how sensory aspects of going to temple can be imbued with several layers of meaning.

Huot and Laliberte Rudman (2010) also highlighted ways in which occupation provides a means to actively carry out place negotiations in ways that can support identity, integration, and meaningful participation among immigrants in Canada. In addition, their work, drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of practice, points to various ways in which social structural elements set conditions in which individuals enact and shape identity through occupations within particular places, pointing to the ways in which social relations of power influence how immigrants can and do relate to place within the on-going processes of integration.

Thus, the occupational science literature further supports the need to incorporate a dynamic conceptualization of place in the study of aging and migration, as well as pointing to the need to consider how negotiations of place involve the exercise of agency within specific social conditions. However, within occupational science, there has been little specific attention to aging immigrants or later life immigration. At the same time, despite an ongoing attempt to explore the active engagement of immigrants in processes of integration within new places, the involvement of aging immigrants in occupations that contribute to the lives of their families and communities have been relatively neglected or downplayed in the larger body of research addressing later life immigrants (Becker, 2003; Lewis, 2009). In addition, to date, there has been little attention to the processes through which relationships to multiple places, cultures and identities take form through everyday practices in older persons’ lives, as well as little explicit attention to the ways in which occupation is drawn upon within such processes (Bozic, 2006; Luborsky, Lysack, & Van Nuil, 2011; Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1987). An increased understanding for practical solutions embedded in everyday practices where participation and agency are enabled is thus needed.

Overall, the review above highlight the need for a re-conceptualization of aging in relationship to place that addresses the dynamic processes involved in negotiating place in the context of aging and migration. From an occupational science perspective, such a framework needs to create space for consideration of how occupation is actively drawn upon within such processes. In the following discussion, concepts that can be drawn upon to create a framework to guide the study of aging and migration in ways that address these needs are outlined.

Conceptualizing the Negotiation of Place with Aging and Migration: Some Conceptual Suggestions

With the ambition to present a conceptual argument for addressing place, in the context of migration, as dynamically created through the doing of occupations, rather than as a static geographical location, scholars have suggested that ‘placemaking’ places a stronger focus on an active and interactive doing process, as well as more closely approximating the complex experiences of aging among people who have moved or live between places. Knowledge about how such relationships are negotiated and expressed among older persons’ everyday lives through daily occupation is of relevance in understanding and supporting people who are growing older in a place other than a so-called place of origin. Such knowledge will also contribute to more nuanced understandings of how occupation is drawn upon as a resource to negotiate and experience inclusion or being part of a local context.

Understanding the life situation of people who are ageing in a place other than their country of origin requires attending to processes through which people create and negotiate a sense of place through experiences and everyday practices (Gesler & Kearnes, 2002; Huot & Rudman, 2010). In line with discussions in environmental gerontology (Moore & Ekerdt, 2011; Wahl et al., 2003) and geography (Gesler & Kearnes, 2002), the authors argue for a conceptualisation of place that sufficiently affords a dynamic perspective needed to encompass the fluidity and complexity characterising how humans make sense of places in the context of migration. A dynamic perspective of place is particularly needed to understand how relationships to multiple places are integrated in experiences and actions related to the present home among older persons who have experiences of international migration (Mondaca, 2010).

Additionally, it has been argued that a dynamic perspective of place is needed to understand the situation for older persons who remain in the same home during long periods of time to denote the dynamics of how older people experience and handle changing characteristics of their home situations and daily lives, for example changes in health and functional capacity, financial aspects, household composition, and neighbourhood characters (Cutchin, 2003; Johansson, Josephsson, & Lilja, 2009; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2003). Dynamic perspectives of place are also needed to understand how older persons’ relationships to the place they inhabit transform when they move from a home of long time residence to a smaller place (Luborsky et al., 2011). Therefore the authors suggest that conceptualisations of place that afford fluidity and impermanence contribute not only to research on ageing in the context of migration, but to ageing research in general; for instance place-making as an imaginative practice, as described elsewhere (Park, 2008).

Place-making has been suggested as a conceptual tool that allows for the foregrounding of process rather than static understandings of place (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Place making is defined as the process in which humans transform physical spaces into socially relevant and meaningful places (Paulsen, 2009; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). It is therefore an adequate conceptual tool to generate knowledge about how people create and negotiate a sense of place through everyday practices in the context of international migration (Gesler & Kearnes, 2002; Huot & Rudman, 2010). Furthermore, the concept of place-making provides

an opportunity to move away from over-simplistic perspectives on ethnicity and culture by addressing the process character of how ethnicity and culture are expressed in everyday practices. Still, little is known about how place-making processes take form (Cutchin, 2001). An occupational perspective can potentially contribute to generating useful knowledge by forefronting and examining how everyday doing is drawn upon to create and continuously negotiate place.

In addition to arguing for the need for a dynamic conceptualization of place, the authors also argue that it is important to move beyond a dichotomous approach to the study of social structure and agency in study of migration, something supported in the literature (Bakewell, 2010; Huot & Rudman, 2010). In other words, there is a need to conceptualize the relation between aging and place in the context of migration in ways that neither involve the overzealous attribution of outcomes to either individual agency (the problematic migrant) or structural elements (the problematic policies). One way that the concept of agency can further be nuanced in relation to place-making is by drawing on the concepts of ‘realized agency success’ versus ‘instrumental agency’, where instrumental agency is viewed as a participatory acting toward a goal on the part of the individual (Sen, 1992).

In contrast, according to Sen (1992), “realized agency success” can be characterized by achieving a given goal albeit not necessarily by one’s own efforts; in other words, the leverage or impetus for achieving a certain goal can be someone other than the person him or herself. This is relevant because it differentiates whether place-making is seen as a process led by an individual (as part of or not part of a collective endeavour) for his or her own goals (instrumental agency), or if place-making can be achieved even in the absence of a particular individual’s own efforts (realized agency). In other words, it is the individual in her or his interactions with others that actively works to create a sense of place that is personally, and socially, meaningful. However, some room must be left for the notion that by virtue of being part of context, albeit not taking an active role in the so-called making, it is still possible to some extent to be part of a place-making process. For instance it is fully possible that a person’s sense of place-making is characterized by dignity and personal meaning even though the person did not individually and actively choose a particular physical space in which to be. The authors argue that an occupational perspective potentially contributes to knowledge about what people do through their everyday actions that contribute to place-making.

Overall, a perspective that manages to grasp how individuals or groups of individuals act upon their situation, within the frame of structural restrictions and resources, is needed to understand the process of place-making. There is a need to rethink agency in order to allow for the inclusion of the actions older people take to make sense of their connection to multiple places around the world, within the frame of the social and political restrictions defining their situation. Within traditional concepts of agency, people are seen as autonomous individuals acting upon a situation by way of individual choice. This perspective is challenged here, in favour of considering agency as dynamically negotiated through everyday practices, contextually situated, and expressed within social structures (Robbins, 2007; Wray, 2004; Zigon, 2009).

One reason why older immigrants may be seen in a negative light is because of a perspective overemphasizing agency as an autonomous individual expression. From this perspective, older immigrants are blamed for not making use of community resources provided for them. That criticism, however, fails to address whether those resources can actually be converted to something relevant for elder immigrants, something referred to as a capability approach (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1992). In this context, resources can be tangible things such as language, housing, or healthcare, but can also be less tangible things such as opportunities for social relations. Thus, for example, rather than viewing the lack of acquisition of a second language as a failure of elder immigrants to draw upon a resource to achieve successful place integration, such an approach would consider the ways in which social conditions work to support the capability of elders to take up such resources. For example, in her study of French-speaking migrants within the Canadian context, Huot (2011) highlighted the ways in which social conditions, such as the lack of available child care, gendered expectations, and insufficient public transport, work against the abilities of immigrants, particularly females, to take up government provided English language classes.

Concluding Remarks

This article aimed to critically examine the concept of aging in place in order to explicate why it is inadequate as a basis for exploring migration and aging, and has presented conceptual arguments for addressing place as dynamically created and negotiated through occupations within broader structural resources and constraints. On the basis of their critical examination of the concept of aging in place, the authors concur with researchers who have challenged long-standing assumptions, based in life course models, of desired continuity of place and identity with ageing, highlighting ways that people move between places while negotiating new and old places as well as actively (re)creating identities (Huot, 2011; Huot & Rudman, 2010; Nayar et al., 2011). Ageing and migration have been explored within several fields, and yet there remains a knowledge gap regarding how engagement in occupations can be part of conceptual frameworks and research dealing with aging in diverse places. Place making draws attention to how occupation can be drawn upon to negotiate relationships that connect people to different places around the world, how the negotiated relations are embedded within the occupations that fill daily lives, and how this process is contextualized and enacted in relation to resources and capabilities.

In 2008 Rowles wrote that “occupational science might profitably adopt a perspective that acknowledges, indeed celebrates the ability of people to proactively create environments that nurture meaning in their life, particularly if they are given the encouragement, resources and support to do so” (p. 133). A conceptual framework that builds on research that acknowledges aspects of agency and capability in the place making process can be valuable in focusing on everyday lives among people who find themselves between places. This is relevant not only for mapping out more clearly the lens through which scholars tackle research questions, but also to improve ways in which engagement in occupations and integrity can be supported amongst persons whom have migrated.

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