

The geography of aging: a geographical contribution to gerontology

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Abstract: The relevant role of geographical investigation within social gerontology was identified in the early 1970s as it became recognized that the environment affects the aging process. Geography's synthesizing and holistic tradition represents an effective methodology to evaluate the complex interaction between elderly persons and their environment. The geography of aging however, has followed social geography's model of describing the spatial context of seniors and the analysis of an older person's relationship to the environment remains in the early stages. In this discussion, it is demonstrated that geography can make a further contribution to gerontology by addressing the inadequacy of conceptual frameworks developed primarily using an ecological approach and which do not establish a comprehensive definition of the environment. Furthermore, it is suggested that to address the inadequacies of these frameworks, gerontological geographers must return to the roots of the Vidalian tradition whereby the interrelationship between environmental and human factors is regarded as an indivisible whole. It is concluded that the application of Vidal's conceptualization of the interplay of society and environment will assist in identifying ways to enhance the quality of life of older adults through the improvement of environmental settings.

Introduction

Contemporary geography's evolution has been characterized by its diversity of approach and its increasing specialization within an auxiliary of sciences (Pinchemel 1983; Cloke *et al.* 1991). One area of study that is pertinent to geographical investigation is the scientific inquiry of social gerontology that endeavors to increase understanding of human aging processes and society's responses to the requirements and preferences of different age groups (Warnes

1990). Since the early 1970s, a geographical contribution to gerontology has been identified based on the application of geography's theoretical and methodological perspectives (Anuchin 1973). Rather than focusing on a description of the accomplishments of individual geographers within this sphere of inquiry however, it is essential to examine the broader issue that there has been limited recognition of the effectiveness of geographical investigation to issues of aging (Eyles & Smith 1978). Initially gerontological geography followed social geography's model of describing the elderly population's residential spatial patterns. In order for the geography of aging to define its unique role within gerontology however, it must go beyond spatial analysis to identify the influence of environmental parameters and the adaptability of older persons. The application of geography's basic organizing principle of human-environment interactions is necessary for the discipline to remain dynamic within gerontology (de Martonne 1983; Rudzitis 1984).

The Aging Process: A Geographical Perspective

With the advancement of gerontological research, it became evident that elderly people occupy, utilize and experience environments in ways distinctly linked to the aging process. Furthermore, it was proposed that the social problems, injustices and inequalities that afflict older persons were associated with their locations and environments. Therefore, it followed that the manipulation or modification of the locations or environments of older people could relieve age-related stresses (Golant *et al.* 1989). As a result, there has been an evolving recognition that the circumstances of elderly people have spatial and locational dimensions. More specifically, a focus on environmental influences over the life experiences of older people has led to the identification of a relevant role of geographical investigation in social gerontology since the early 1970s (Golant *et al.* 1989). Unfortunately, "the clear potential of a geographical contribution is unexplored and only a minute share of its now considerable research capacity is devoted to the tasks" (Warnes 1982: 5).

In a report of the Association of American Geographer's Task Force on Environmental Quality (Lowenthal 1973) it was outlined that geography's concern with locational variation and spatial relationships increase the researcher's awareness of the causes of differences among environments. Furthermore, while other social and behavioral sciences addressed singular components of human-environment interactions, geography's synthesizing and holistic tradition represented a more effective approach to the study of these complex interactions (Golant 1979). An analysis of an older person's relationship to his or her environment however, remains in the early stages of development as a comprehensive approach has not yet been adopted.

Progress has been made in describing the spatial context of elderly persons. This emphasis on spatial patterns reflected social geography's strong alignment with analytical methods and models of an explicitly spatial type (Hewitt & Hare 1973). Although historically the theme of geography was the relationship between humankind and its environment, the excesses of environmental determinism brought environmental studies into disrepute (Spate 1968; Berry 1978). After 1930 geography began to emphasize areal differentiation, and, as a result, the development of social geography was characterized by a multifaceted perspective on the spatial organization of social phenomena and areal differentiations which emanate from society (Buttimer 1968). It followed that the geography of aging would also examine the spatial patterns of older persons.

An emphasis on the spatial organization of the elderly population remains important for the identification of the spatial components of service provision. Nevertheless, it has been imperative that geographical research adopt a more comprehensive approach in order to establish a greater understanding of how transactions between older persons and their environment affect their quality of life and ability to remain independent. Research on activity patterns, service implementation and housing does represent a trend to incorporate the effect of environmental influences on elderly persons. It is important to note however, that

while this shift in emphasis illustrates a greater awareness of the environmental implications of an aging population, it does not represent a comprehensive analysis of the complex interplay between elderly persons and their environment. In order for geography to make a significant contribution to gerontology, a holistic and integrated conceptualization is required of the relationship between the older person and environment (Rowles 1986).

The Ecology of Aging

The investigation of the interface of aging and environment has been dominated by an ecological approach (Haldemann & Wister 1993). Social and behavioral scientists now recognize the need to conceptualize the environments occupied by people in order to understand the aging process. Nevertheless, most efforts to define the meaning and measurement of environment in terms of transactions with elderly persons have been largely unsuccessful. What emerges “from such discipline-focused approaches is an artificially fragmented environment, the parts of which belie their membership in an interdependent system” (Golant 1979:6). The inherent weaknesses of non-geographical approaches is clearly exemplified by the ecological model of aging proposed by M.P. Lawton, an environmental psychologist (Lawton & Nahemow 1973).

Lawton’s ecological model of aging is considered to be the most comprehensive conceptual model relating the individual, the environment and aging (McPherson 1990). The model postulates that the components of individual capability and environmental demands are the major predictive components of behavioral responses of older persons. While Lawton has expanded his interpretation of individual capability in the ecological equation, he has failed to characterize the environment in a manner that allows for an appropriate operationalization of the model (Lawton 1989). Revisions of the model have resulted in a shift “from the impact of the environment to the role that individuals play in the interpretation and shaping of their environment” (Haldemann & Wister 1993:

38). The revised models which have advanced the concepts of proactivity (Lawton 1989), autonomy-security (Parmelee & Lawton 1990), and temperament (Lawton 1998) demonstrate the increased importance allocated to the individual component of the model.

In contrast, the environment has remained comparatively static. Lawton (1970) proposed that the environment be divided into five distinct dimensions which include the personal, the interpersonal or small group, the suprapersonal, the social and the physical environments. These original efforts were considered to be a first step "to operationally disentangle objective and subjective dimensions of environmental experience" (Rowles & Ohta 1983: 236-237). Despite the original advances made by Lawton, his subsequent revisions of the ecological model of aging have not included further development of a more comprehensive typology of environmental characteristics that affect the aging process. The subsequent stagnation of any further conceptualization of the environment has resulted in a limited research agenda (Ward, La Gory & Sherman 1988). The five defined components of the environment are inexact and do not promote a standardized taxonomy of environmental elements that can be replicated and compared in multidisciplinary research which considers the effects of the person-environment interaction on the aging individual. It is this lack of a functional description of the environment which will block further progress to person-environment research (Parr 1980). Lawton has acknowledged that a major problem for the study of environment and aging is the lack of consensus regarding the dimensions of the environment (Lawton 1977; 1979; 1982).

The concept of the environment is a complex interplay of forces that interrelates physical, social and cultural properties to elicit patterns of behavior (Ward, La Gory & Sherman 1988). This interrelationship creates difficulties both conceptually and methodologically to develop a broad definition that incorporates all possible dimensions of the environment (Golant 1984; Markson 1984). The ecology of aging lacks a research agenda that incorporates a unified consensus on what environmental attributes are important and how they should be measured to analyze the person-environment transaction. The development of a holistic, integrated conceptualization of the environment can best be

addressed within a geographical perspective. Geography has begun to reassess the significance of person-environment research and new opportunities have opened for the application of concepts and methods that recognize the interwoven character of organism and environment (Spate 1968; Hewitt & Hare 1973). The work of Rowles (1978; 1981; 1983; 1991) demonstrates that advances are now being made towards a greater conceptualization of the implications of interactions between older persons and their environment. Rowles (1978) has identified the need to consider person-environment relationships within a holistic framework that incorporates social, psychological as well as physical dimensions of spatial experience.

This new emphasis on a concept of the environment as an integrated system related to the individual's environmental experience represents a reaffirmation of gerontological geography's roots in the Vidalian school of thought. Vidal's recognition of the essential interdependence of environment and human factors must be considered as the cornerstone of a comprehensive approach to the geography of aging. Only with the development of a conceptual framework that defines the complex interplay between the elderly person and environment will a geographical contribution to gerontology be firmly established.

The Vidalian Tradition: A Comprehensive Approach

Paul Vidal de la Blache, the founder of French geography, is considered to be one of geography's greatest entrepreneurs (Dickinson 1969). In *Principles of Human Geography* (published posthumously in France in 1921 and in English in 1926), Vidal postulated that, as a result of increasing knowledge concerning physical laws and the relations between living beings, the scientific inquiry of geography offered a new conception of interrelationships between the earth and humans. His main objective was to establish a principle of "the conception of the earth as a whole, whose parts are coordinated, where phenomena follow a definite sequence and obey general laws" (Vidal de la Blache 1926: 6-7). He considered geography to be the essential unity of a region whereby the complex

interrelations between environmental and human factors make up an indivisible whole (Dickinson 1969). He introduced:

an essentially geographic concept: that of environment as composite, capable of grouping and of holding together heterogeneous beings in mutual vital interrelationships. This idea seems to be the law governing the geography of human creatures. Every region is a domain where many dissimilar beings, artificially brought together, have subsequently adapted themselves to a common experience (Vidal de la Blache, 1926: 10).

In contrast to determinism, Vidal emphasized the idea of territorial unity in which human activity was an active element, not merely a passive recipient of environmental influence (Cloke *et al.* 1991). According to their level of development and cultural heritage, humans utilize the range of possibilities provided by the natural environment, and are thereby active agents in the creation of habitats (Dickinson 1969; Pinchemel 1983). Accordingly, it is the human element that gives character to a region (Watson 1951).

Social geography is rooted in Vidal's conception of *genres de vie*. Society, according to Vidal, could not be explained entirely by biological, psychological or environmental interpretations (Buttimer 1968). Rather, he considered that society consists of an intricate network of ideas and bonds that provide stability and orientation to human life in a particular geographical setting. He expressed the complex interplay between society and environment as particular patterns of living or *genres de vie* (Eyles & Smith 1978). Vidal specified that *genres de vie* represented society's ongoing contact with nature as humans use a set of techniques, derived from past experience, to obtain the material necessities of life within a functional social order (Buttimer 1968).

The essence of Vidal's approach to geographic study is based on the interaction of human communities with their environment. He regarded human geography to be the study of living landscapes that have recorded humans' interpretation and utilization of their environments. *Genres de vie*, or styles of living, represented the

integrated result of physical, historical and socio-cultural influences surrounding human relationships with their milieu. These *genres de vie* were a fundamental innovation for social geography because they demonstrated that humankind's relationship to milieu in concrete living situations was a social phenomena (Buttimer 1978).

Finally, Vidal envisioned an analytical approach to the relationship between society and environment that is relevant to the current study of gerontological geography:

The essential geographical issue was neither the influence of man on the earth nor the influence of the earth on man; methodologically it implied neither analysis of ecological processes *per se* nor the analysis of socio-cultural and historical forces; rather its central aim should be to grasp the ongoing dialectic of milieu and civilization, the perennial tension between the milieu externe (physically observable patterns and processes) and the milieu interne (values, habits, beliefs and ideas) of a civilization. The external milieu provided a range of possibilities, the internal milieu dictated the parameters of choice within that range (Buttimer 1978: 61).

This conceptualization of the "milieu externe" and the "milieu interne" is particularly significant for the geography of aging. It suggests that there are both objective and subjective components of the environment that must be considered when evaluating the human-environment dialectic of older adults. Such a comprehensive definition of the environment will assist in identifying ways to enhance the quality of life of older adults through the improvement of environmental settings. Therefore, the incorporation of the Vidalian tradition in the conceptual framework of environment and aging presents new parameters in which social geography can contribute to a greater understanding of the environmental implications of aging.

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