Navigating old age and the urban terrain: Geographies of ageing from Africa

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Abstract

This paper extends research on geographies of ageing in relation to urban academic and policy debates. We illustrate how older people in urban African contexts deploy their agency through social and spatial (im)mobilities, intergenerational relations and (inter)dependencies. Through doing so, we reveal how urban contexts shape, and are shaped by, older people's tactics for seizing opportunities and navigating the urban terrain. Our analysis demonstrates how a more substantive dialogue between insights on ageing in African contexts and urban ageing policy can create new forms of knowledge that are more equitable and just, both epistemologically and in their policy impacts.

Keywords

Africa, gerontology, mobility, social infrastructure, social navigation, urban

I Introduction

Despite increasing references to ageing in urban policy and poverty reduction strategies, scholars have noted that academic and urban policy circles often fail to grasp the agency of elderly residents and how they contribute to social dynamics (Andrews et al., 2013; Finlay and Finn, 2020; Schwanen and Páez, 2010), particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Aboderin et al., 2017; Desai and Tye, 2009).

We agree, and further contend that while well intentioned and potentially capable of improving people's life chances, this recent focus on older people frequently disassociates them from their lived experiences of contemporary

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urbanism. There is, therefore, a disconnect between discourses about the challenges facing older populations and how these individuals experience ageing.

These opening reflections also chime with concerns that knowledge about older people's experiences in urban contexts is empirically and conceptually limited because, while the majority of older people live in low- and middle-income countries, most scholarship concentrates on cities in high-income European and North American countries (Schwanen et al., 2012). To be clear, there is much to be learned from empirical and theoretical scholarship on the experiences of older residents in high-income countries. For example, Schwanen at al. (2012: 1293) show that to understand older people's experiences and connections, they need to be located in complex 'assemblages of human and non-human actants' including bodies, images, ideas, practices, artefacts, technologies, and urban environments in which space and ageing co-evolve and are continually being made and remade. Other studies usefully reveal how older people experience a variety of pressures reflecting their: physiological and cognitive vulnerabilities; changing patterns of spatial use; and reliance upon community, intergenerational relations and networks for support (Buffel et al., 2012; Finlay et al., 2020: Humphries and Canham, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2003; Wight et al., 2009). The importance of older people in constructing space and place has also been emphasized (Andrews et al, 2013; Barnes et al., 2012; Finlay et al., 2019; Murray, 2015).

In this paper, we explore how a focus on ageing in urban African contexts can complement and advance the academic and policy debates alluded to above. This overarching aim is accompanied by two objectives. First, to extend geographies of ageing and urban policy debates by bringing them into conversation with the experiences of older people residing in low- and middle-income countries. To do so we draw attention to the frequently neglected experiences of older people in African towns and cities. Our second objective is to offer a new way to conceptualize geographies of ageing that enables us to generate more relational understandings of old age attuned to the urban dynamics in, and potentially beyond, African contexts. We do this by combining 'social infrastructure' perspectives with Vigh's (2006, 2009) 'social navigation' theory. Both objectives reflect the wider need to foster a more critical and situated approach to older urban populations in global policy agendas. We concur with Schwanen and Páez (2010: 592) that the additional contextuality that can be gained from looking beyond high-income countries is needed not merely to provide geographical specificity, but also to understand the mobility[1] practices and experiences of different older people and 'think more critically about the nature of ageing and old age'.

In the next section, we briefly scope the global urban policy context as it relates to the field of ageing, before examining Africa-focused ageing policies. We propose that in order to create urban policies that are more equitable and just, both epistemologically and in their policy impacts, a more substantive dialogue is needed between urban ageing policy and empirical insights on ageing in low- and middle-income countries, including those in Africa. In order to act upon these insights and realize their potential for directing new geographies of ageing, the paper sets out a conceptual approach that brings together scholarship on African urbanism and 'social navigation'. We use this analytical approach to examine emerging literature on ageing in urban Africa, which brings to light the themes of social and spatial (im)mobilities, intergenerational relations, and (inter)dependencies that older people manifest as their lives shape and are shaped by urban dynamics. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings and conceptual framing for geographies of ageing within Africa and beyond.

II Active ageing and age-friendly cities

Globally, the population aged 60 and above is growing faster than all younger age groups (United Nations, 2017). In 2018, for the first time, the global population of people aged 60 and over surpassed one billion. This demographic change is fastest in low- and middle-income countries (HelpAge International, 2018). In an African context, this demographic shift is occurring alongside urbanization. Africa's urban population is expected to nearly triple between 2018 and 2050, reaching 1.5 billion urban dwellers, representing 22 per cent of the world's urban population (United Nations, 2019). These trends are reflected in the emergence of a significant global urban policy discourse concerned with ageing and city life that revolves around two key concepts: 'active ageing' and 'age-friendly cities'. These concepts are part of a wider urban agenda linked to the notion of 'urban citizenship', which is underpinned by the following principles: encouraging voluntary activity and engagement with public governance; recognizing and supporting changing needs across the life course; and creating opportunities to involve ageing populations more effectively in the planning and regeneration of urban neighbourhoods (Barnes et al., 2012; Buffel et al., 2012).

The term 'active ageing' was developed during the United Nations' Year of Older People in 1999 (Walker, 2008), before being adopted by the European Union (EU) and the World Health Organization (WHO). It refers to the idea that older people should be able to participate in social, cultural, spiritual, economic and civic matters (Buffel et al., 2012), and encourages their inclusive and participatory citizenship as a crucial dimension of sustainable urban development. Subsequently, the WHO launched the 'Global Age-friendly Cities' initiative in 2006, developing a checklist of essential elements of an 'age-friendly city' including: transportation, outdoor spaces and public buildings, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, community support, and health services (WHO, 2007). In 2010, the WHO established the 'Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities', followed by the outlining of priorities for a 'Decade of Action' (2021–30) on 'healthy ageing', a term which replaced 'active ageing' in 2015 (WHO, 2018).

An increasing number of cities are making commitments to become age-friendly through actions across health, long-term care, transport, housing, labour, social protection, and information and communication technology sectors (WHO, 2016); however, these interventions only tend to be implemented in high-income countries. By September 2018, the Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities membership had grown to 760. Although 15 African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Lesotho, Madagascar, Senegal, Seychelles, Tanzania and Zimbabwe) have reported national programmes on age-friendly environments, Africa is the only global region with no registered cities/communities in the network. Consequently, African countries are unable to access the considerable resources, partnership opportunities and coordinated policy focus that membership offers (WHO, 2018), and have yet to contribute substantively to 'age-friendly' approaches or be included in (and inform) such global initiatives (Aboderin et al., 2017). This is despite recent research with older people, caregivers and service providers in Bamenda (Cameroon), Conakry (Guinea) and Kampala (Uganda), suggesting the relevance and need for an age-friendly cities and communities' approach (WHO, 2018).

In low- and middle-income countries, especially those in Africa, these shortcomings are further compounded by the perceived greater political, economic and social challenges posed

by demographic shifts towards youth (Aboderin, 2012). Youthful demographic profiles result in a current emphasis on youth-oriented aspirations of the future, 'overshadowing older people as vigorous and valued sources of community pride' (Chepngeno and Hosegood, 2012: 95). This has meant that 'issues of older persons, if considered at all, are viewed at best as marginal to, and at worst as a distraction from, core national policy interests and development goals' (Aboderin, 2012: 69). Where policy and development interventions exist, they are frequently patchy and underfunded, an issue that will only grow in urgency as countries increasingly face unprecedented ageing. As the following sections explore, critically engaging with the lived experiences of ageing in Africa has the potential to not only shape new geographies of ageing but also aid the development of age-friendly policies that are more grounded, equitable and just.

III Ageing in urban Africa: Disjuncture with policy

Towns and cities in Africa, like their counterparts found across low- and middle-income countries in Asia and South America, are set to face the complex development issue of simultaneous poverty and unprecedented ageing, without the necessary health and socio-economic infrastructures or age- and gender-sensitive policy provision to support their older populations (Desai and Tye, 2009; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2010; Makoni, 2008). Despite the enshrining of older populations' rights in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, in which they should have 'the right to special measures of protection in keeping with their physical or moral needs' (OAU, 1982: 6), policy interventions vary widely across Africa. In Uganda, 93 per cent of people aged over 60 have no savings, pension or social security, with the majority engaged in agriculture to meet their basic needs (MGLSD, 2015). Despite growing

political awareness of the pressing needs to support the older population, an Older Persons' Bill (2019) is still under discussion by Parliament. South Africa, in contrast to most other African countries, has a substantial and well-established pension programme that ensures extensive coverage, mostly through non-contributory social pensions provided to older people (men over 65 and women over 60) lacking other forms of pension support (Barrientos and Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011).

While policy interventions may vary across Africa, studies have consistently demonstrated how poverty experienced in adulthood is likely to deepen with age, especially where there are a lack of adequate welfare policies or systematic guidelines to address the interests and needs of older Africans (Aboderin et al., 2017; Cohen and Menken, 2006; Ezeh et al., 2017; Issahaku and Neysmith, 2013; Van der Geest, 2016). In the absence of such policy interventions, population ageing could drive increases in poverty where households and communities provide the majority of old-age support to large numbers of older people (Aboderin and Epping-Jordan, 2017; APHRC, 2017; Gorman and Heslop, 2002). Given that the number of older persons is expected to grow fastest in Africa over the coming decades, with the population aged 60 and over predicted to increase more than three-fold from 69 to 226 million between 2017 and 2050 (United Nations, 2017), this is potentially a critical issue. Moreover, older people are frequently rendered invisible in humanitarian operations and policies responding to forced, and particularly internal, displacement, despite forming significant proportions of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), refugee groups and those 'left behind' by mass migration (HelpAge International, 2013).

The insights outlined above have situated this paper in an appropriate policy landscape, setting the scene for the conceptual discussion that is to follow. This summary has also served the additional purpose of illustrating how ageing

connects to pressing debates in urban studies. Specifically, these policy insights, and their focus on shortcomings of welfare provision for older residents, reflect a deficit approach within urban policy and mainstream urban theory whereby, as noted by postcolonial urban scholars, towns and cities in Africa are viewed as experiments in 'failed modernization' (Pieterse, 2011: 6; cf. Doherty, 2017; Myers, 2011; Parnell and Pieterse, 2010; Robinson, 2006; Simone, 2004). This deficit approach coalesces with African governments and global development organizations that continue to propagate 'old-age dependency notions' founded on misplaced perceptions of older people as redundant. Our point is not that old people in Africa have a blissful existence, rather that this deficit perspective provides only a partial insight into the elusive nuances and variations in African urban experiences including, we would claim, the lived experiences of the region's elderly population. As Aboderin (2012: 72) argues, in Africa:

> ... older persons are, implicitly or explicitly, assumed to be unproductive or marginally productive, thereby rendering input into their physical or cognitive capacity redundant. However, such assumptions, as well as the use of old-age dependency ratios, are fallacious. Labour statistics for most sub-Saharan African countries show that large, or even majority, percentages of older adults remain economically active.

Our concern about the relative marginalization of older people's lived reality in urban policy and governance in Africa has been recognized elsewhere (Chatterjee, 2011). This marginalization is partly due to the agency of older people in shaping urban contexts being heavily discounted, if considered at all, as agency has come to be directly associated with activity and action. These are traits typically linked with youthful populations; thus, spaces are governed for the 'active', i.e. the young and working-age. Studies have also revealed 'the constrained opportunities of older residents to participate constructively in local decision-making and agenda setting' (Aboderin et al., 2017: 9), reflecting broader shortcomings in local governance participation (Buffel et al., 2012; Rigon, 2014). In Uganda, for example, while older people are customarily lauded in Bugandan society (Seeley et al., 2009), Nyanzi (2009: 467) points to 'their absence in national policies and public programmes'. The so-called 'paradox of neighbourhood participation' applies especially well to older people who spend considerable time in their neighbourhood (being part of urban settings) but are often neglected when it comes to decision-making processes within their neighbourhood (taking part in urban settings) (Buffel et al., 2012).

In sum, the policy insights revealed to this point indicate the need to conceptualize and capture the dynamic agency of older people as they engage with and navigate the opportunities and constraints that have become part of everyday urban contexts in low- and middle-income countries. This new conceptual orientation should provide a means to challenge urban policy and development discourses that disenfranchise elderly populations, disassociate them from their relational and situated experiences of urban settings, and frequently negate individuals' experiences of ageing. In order to achieve the above, in the next section we bring the concept of 'social infrastructure' into conversation with a 'social navigation' approach.

IV Navigating ageing in urban Africa: A conceptual conversation

In this section, we begin the process of extending geographies of ageing and urban policy debates by generating more relational understandings of old age. We do so by introducing insights offered by recent approaches to African urban life through scholarship on 'social infrastructure' and 'social navigation'. This illustrates how bringing these approaches into

conversation provides a conceptual apparatus for capturing older residents' past, present and future movements through, and engagement with, precarious urban settings. We argue that this conceptual conversation provides a lens for academics and policy-makers to better understand the complex lifeworlds of older Africans, and potentially older people beyond the continent, who are navigating unequal urban settings.

1 Social infrastructure

Numerous scholars have taken issue with what is perceived as the narrow analysis of the physical infrastructure of urban spaces (cf. Doherty, 2017; Mann and Nzayisenga, 2015; Silver, 2014; Wignall et al., 2019). Notably, drawing inspiration from the improvisational livelihoods of urban dwellers in Johannesburg's inner city, Simone (2004) theorizes that urban spaces are constructed in and through the movement and activity of people. This, Simone (2004: 410) contends, creates a 'conjunction of heterogeneous activities, modes of production, and institutional forms' that come together to form what he terms 'people as infrastructure'. Simone (2004: 410) persuasively argues that 'social infrastructures' formed through the conjunctions of actors and activities 'become a coherent platform for social transaction and livelihood'. They are constituted through the 'highly mobile and provisional possibilities for how people live and make things, how they use the urban environment and collaborate with one another' (Simone, 2004: 410).

Despite offering important conceptual insights, Simone's notion of 'social infrastructure' has been criticized for promoting an overly romanticized view of urban social relations, particularly its neglect of power, inequality, tension and ambiguity in the lives of urban inhabitants (Doherty, 2017; Xiao and Adebayo, 2019). As McFarlane and Silver (2017) begin to explore, mobility can infer added emotional risk suffused by the potential for failure, uncertainty

and fear, which are characteristic of precarious urban living. Taking these ideas further in his research on motorbike taxi drivers (*boda boda*) in Kampala, Uganda, Doherty (2017: 194) has argued for the need to consider 'disposable people as infrastructure', which he sees as a 'means of making life within highly unequal cities'. Doherty shows how *boda boda* infrastructure is both shaped by and produces disposability in terms of surplus, embodiment and displacement. Such daily vulnerabilities must be considered if we are to fully account for the ways in which elderly people experience 'social infrastructure' as 'unfair, exclusionary, degraded, and degrading by those who live and work within them' (Doherty, 2017: 200).

To develop Simone's conceptual framing of social infrastructure, recent scholarship has sought to repurpose the infrastructure lens to more broadly understand the interaction between everyday urban lives and the built environments in which people reside (cf. Graham and McFarlane, 2014; Larkin, 2008; Silver, 2014; Wignall et al., 2019) and how collectives of individuals serve and inhabit city spaces (Doherty 2017; Mann and Nzayisenga, 2015; Xiao and Adebayo, 2019). McFarlane and Silver (2017: 463) have recently called for a more people-centred conceptualization of urban infrastructure, which accounts for the connections between 'people and things in sociomaterial relations that sustain urban life'. As they suggest, envisioning social infrastructure in this way means understanding more concretely how social relations in urban centres are 'made and held stable through work and changing ways of connecting. It is a connective tissue, often unpredictable, anchoring urban life in popular neighbourhoods across the urban world' (McFarlane and Silver, 2017: 463). In this way, a social infrastructure framework can be drawn upon to explore how older people's physical, aspirational and potential mobilities are enmeshed in 'multiple topographies of city life', including multi-faceted networks of

physical landscapes, modes of transport, and social relations, often in extremely difficult conditions (McFarlane and Silver, 2017). We now turn to social navigation.

2 Social navigation

The concept of 'social navigation' emerged from a focus on young people's experiences in Africa. While conducting research in war zones to explore how young people find ways to exist in conflict-affected settings, Henrik Vigh (2006) observed how his informants were constantly in the process of renegotiating the trajectories of their lives, using a repertoire of tactics, behaviours and socio-cultural assets to maximize their social opportunities. Similarly to Honwana's (2005) work on 'tactical agency', which entails seizing opportunities in order to cope with imposed constraints, Vigh (2006) proposed the idea of 'social navigation' as an 'analytic optic' to help theorize these insights. As existing concepts and theories tended to look either at the way social formations move and change over time, or how agents move within social formations, social navigation allowed Vigh (2009) to reveal the interactivity between the two. More specifically, the concept of social navigation

> . . . affords a view to the dynamic co-creation of figure and ground, showing us that people act in and shape their social environments in constant dialogue with the way the social environment moves and the way it is predicted to 'act' upon them and shape the circumstances of their lives. (Vigh, 2009: 433)

In this way, social navigation 'encompasses a denser temporality' (Vigh, 2009: 425) focusing attention on how social forces shape people's agency as they negotiate their *immediate* social and spatial positions. At the same time, it encourages an examination of how those same social forces influence people's *imagined* (prospective) social and spatial positions.

Accordingly, the theory of social navigation has been deployed to understand contexts of economic deprivation (Esson, 2015; Langevang and Gough, 2009), moral navigation (Bürge, 2011) and peacebuilding activities and activism (Agbiboa, 2015; Korzenevica, 2016). To date, while this theory has been largely applied to youth contexts, as Vigh (2006: 37) claims, social navigation is the hallmark of people in contexts 'characterised by marginality, stagnation and a truncation of social being', which can be common, as we have already explored, to the situations in which older people in Africa find themselves.

A focus on the socio-spatial navigation of people as they age in urban locales has the potential to generate a clearer picture of the ongoing socio-economic roles of older people in urban settings, which can also reveal the complex ways the social, economic and spatial interrelate in people's daily lives as they age. This is key here as we seek to theorize how it is that across urban sub-Saharan Africa, despite older people often being deprived of a locus of power, they are able to navigate within a multiplicity of spaces and states of being. Therefore, when we foreground the diverse everyday experiences of older people in urban settings, we can 'locate agency, possibility and resistance' in their daily lives (Derickson, 2015: 651). It is here that we can confer 'recognition on spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the archives and annals of urban theory' (Roy, 2011: 224) and policymaking.

A 'social navigation' lens can also help us refine and nuance the idea of 'social infrastructures' introduced earlier, because it enables us to amplify the movement and dynamism in social infrastructures as hinted at but never really fully marshalled by Simone, Silver, McFarlane and others. In this case, mobilization is realized through older urban inhabitants as they generate and sustain social connections, while continually confronting the dissolution

and degradation of the physical and social infrastructures in which they live. As we now illustrate, social navigation alongside social infrastructure offers a mechanism for exploring physical and imagined (im)mobility in geographies of ageing. This consideration of how older people navigate urban 'sites of interlocking and conflicting commercial, social, and political interests' (Buffel et al., 2012: 601), and how these generate diverse opportunities and constraints in becoming and being old, offers new directions for geographies of ageing and inclusive urban processes within and beyond Africa. In the next section, we foreground the diversity and complexity of becoming old in African contexts and think through how socioeconomic trends and urban processes affect social and spatial (im)mobilities of older populations. We then attend to the intergenerational relations and (inter)dependencies of ageing that shape, and are shaped by, urban dynamics.

V Navigating social and spatial (im)mobilities into old age

Recent understandings of advanced age and eldership in Africa demonstrate how they are inherently relational constructs rooted in particular historic contexts, rather than discrete categories (Kodzi et al., 2011; Nyanzi, 2009). In northwest Tanzania, 'advanced age' is defined based on 'social age' through considerations such as having grandchildren and physical capacity, where a difference is drawn between older people who have strength and those who do not (De Klerk, 2016: 141–2). What it means 'to be old' and definitions of who is 'old' in contemporary Africa are thus very much socially determined. As Hoffman and Pype (2016: 4) argue, it is the mutability of 'one's position within social networks that defines one as an "elder/grand/big person" or as a "petit/small person"'. Kopytoff (1971: 131) illustrates this in his study of ancestral veneration among the Suku in today's Democratic Republic of Congo, demonstrating how 'Eldership is not an absolute state of being old . . . [but] is always relative to someone who is younger'.

Furthermore, not all those who are old are 'elders'. In Ghana, for example, 'elders' refers to a specific group of older men who work closely with a chief in governing their community. While their power has diminished over time, a chief and his elders still control the sale (leasehold) of land and may be brought in as mediators in local disputes (Gough and Yankson, 2000). In such situations of customary land tenure, which is especially widespread in West Africa, chiefs and elders have the potential to play a major role in influencing how towns and cities grow through the provision of services (using money raised from land sales) and hence shape the residential mobilities of older people within the city. This illustrates why we contend that older populations are drivers of African urban social infrastructure and play a key role in the connections between 'people and things in socio-material relations that sustain urban life' (McFarlane and Silver, 2017: 463).

Returning to the challenge to older people's immobility, Gilleard and Higgs' (2005) dichotomy between those who are compelled to age in place (suffering increasing isolation and disengagement), and those for whom geographical mobility presents new opportunities (for engagement and the exercise of personal agency), is informative. The dichotomy encourages us to consider how the relative position of old age in urban African contexts can evoke a 'social landscape of gendered power, rights, expectations and relationships' (Durham, 2000: 116). This is significant because whilst many older Africans might appear marginalized from and immiserated by urban life, akin to Doherty's (2017) disposable people, some are in fact expressing diverse forms of creative and mobile agency linked to complex imagined geographies (Vigh, 2009). They are generating new urban configurations in the process, which operate in conversation with pluralized local

understandings of old age and the life course. Even in displacement contexts, reports suggest older people continue to actively contribute to household income, childcare and community decision-making (HelpAge International, 2013). Drawing on longitudinal data from Nairobi, Kodzi et al. (2011: 463) report how 79 per cent of older urban residents (aged 50 years or above) work or undertake some form of income-generating activity. Such studies strongly challenge the notion that older people are always economically dependent, noting how many resist retirement, develop more secure and powerful financial positions, and play vital socio-economic roles that go beyond conventional understanding of mobility/ immobility (cf. Kodzi et al., 2011; Nyanzi, 2009; Pype, 2016; Wignall et al., 2019).

Central to understanding the multi-layered agency of older people is the need to expand on the handful of studies exploring intersections between ageing and factors including gender and socio-economic status outside of a caring framework (Pype, 2016; Wignall et al., 2019). A key challenge for future research on geographies of ageing, particularly as it relates to urbanism in low- and middle-income countries, is therefore to understand how older populations' mobilities dynamically interact with the interrelated and shifting socio-economic dimensions of urban change. This will need to be accompanied by an examination of how older people's experiences are differentially marked by intersecting geographies of social difference including race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, ethnic or religious background, marital or migrant status and education level. Such knowledge is crucial if we are to develop the evidence needed to drive more inclusive and equitable urban policies towards ageing in the margins of African urbanism. Attentiveness to these inequalities and barriers that older people creatively manage and navigate can shed new light on the spectrum of mobilities and (im)mobilities in which they are immersed as they navigate precarious urban contexts (cf. Buffel et al., 2012; Finlay et al., 2020; Schwanen et al., 2012: Yu and Rosenberg, 2020).

Taking the case of gender relations, research shows that older women in Africa, and elsewhere, frequently face greater economic burdens than men (cf. Avis, 2000; Calasanti, 2005; Chepngeno-Langat and Hosegood, 2012; Okiria, 2011; Sherif, 2007; Tamale, 2011). Gender was found to be the most pronounced axis of inequality amongst older people in Nairobi, where older men were reported to be much better off in terms of employment, opportunities and overall quality of life, while women were relatively poorer and typically the most disadvantaged (Aboderin et al., 2017). In Uganda, the impact of widowhood upon older people's well-being and social support is deeply gendered and tied to ideas and experiences of mobility. While widowers are recognized as the sole owners of property and children, and encouraged to remarry, many widows face the likelihood of losing the status, property and children gained during their marriage and may be restricted from remarrying or moving elsewhere for greater opportunity (Nyanzi, 2009). We propose that a way to understand how these geographies of social difference shape the tactics and strategies employed by older populations, as they simultaneously move through the latter stages of the life course and urban space, is to follow Vigh's (2006) guidance. More specifically, to examine how social forces that create hierarchical categorizations are *used* by older populations to negotiate social and spatial positions, alongside an examination of how those same social forces influence older people's *imagined* (prospective) social and spatial positions.

Such understandings are important because African urban environments are known to cement and erode traditional constructions of authority and linked responsibilities (cf. Hoffman and Pype, 2016; Van der Geest, 2016; Wignall et al., 2019). This holds true beyond

African contexts. In their study of older people in Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city, Varley and Blasco (2000) illustrate how shifting intergenerational kin (power) relations, gendered employment patterns in earlier life, coupled with urban poverty, lead to more older women living alone or being dependent on relatives for care, and instances of older men experiencing isolation from their adult children. Empirical studies further reveal the fragmentation and segregation of urban space alluded to above, whereby residents can be confined to specific areas, excluded from (and by) particular spaces, individuals and institutions, and their mobilities regulated directly or indirectly by a combination of age, gender, class and income differentials (cf. Becker, 2003; Scharf et al., 2002).

In African towns and cities, as with urban environments more globally, there is a spatiality to social and material inequalities (Chant and McIlwaine, 2016; Esson et al., 2016; Finlay et al., 2019; McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Thieme, 2018). The socio-economic disparities among older people, such as those discussed above, can, therefore, be further compounded by (im)mobility. For example, it could be informative to understand how, if at all, older people living in peripheral areas with limited access to transportation make their way to and from places. Similarly, how do older people residing in informal urban settlements, where connection to transport services can be patchy, attempt to expand their horizons of possibility (cf. Ezeh et al., 2006; Mberu et al., 2013)? Such questions have received insufficient critical treatment in urban policy agendas concerning low- and middle-income countries partly, as mentioned above, due to norms that mark urban spaces as being 'for the youthful, adult and middle-aged residents who were there to tap into the vast opportunities' (Nyanzi, 2009: 469). Relatedly, some urban policy narratives concerning the use of urban space revolve around the perception that physical mobility is an inherent element

of agency, which becomes synonymous with youth.

Individuals who are not mobile, or are perceived to be physically immobile, can become associated with a lack of agency and hence be attributed lower social and economic value. Pype (2016: 52), however, shows how engaging with African urbanism qualifies this narrative as immobility is often 'a sign of power, honour and privilege' afforded to older people. Meanwhile 'cultural logics of respect act to cement seniors in their dwelling' and maintain the persistent image that people with authority, elders and also the so-called "big men"...do not "move"' (Pype, 2016: 52–3): a set of behaviours that, if explored further, may offer new perspectives on urban social infrastructure. As Vigh (2009: 433) puts it, this shifts 'our analytical gaze...toward the way people not just act in but interact with their social environment and adjust their lives to the constant influence (in *potentia* and *presentia*) of social forces and change'. This may take empirical innovations as well as theoretical ones (Vigh (2009: 420). As Wignall et al. (2019) have explored in their study of livelihood biographies among older urban residents of two Ghanaian cities, capturing a diversity of everyday mobilities, life-cycle migration and the acknowledgement of future potentialities can highlight the continued contributions of older men and women to producing not only social and economic value but urban space itself. These two studies point to the more dynamic forms of (im)mobility among older people in African towns and cities that is currently underappreciated in urban development narratives or, indeed, 'age-friendly' policies.

How older people perceive and imagine mobilities and immobilities can influence their livelihood and mobility strategies in both the short and long-term. While there have been longstanding trends of 'return migration' of older African adults going back to their rural homes from the city (Issahaku and Neysmith, 2013; Parmar et al., 2014), more recent research

highlights how towns and cities are increasingly becoming the permanent home to a growing number of older people. When older people migrate out of the city, these decisions are shaped by whether they have children living elsewhere, their prior intention to out-migrate, their duration of stay in the city, socio-cultural affective ties to urban places, their socio-economic status, and ownership of land outside of the city (Falkingham et al., 2012). Increasing numbers of urban migrants are instead ageing and growing old in the urban settlements that marked the first step in their rural-to-urban migration, with little prospect of moving out or back to their rural origins (cf. Chepngeno-Langat and Ezeh, 2007; Falkingham et al., 2011; Gough et al., 2019; Potts, 1995, 2009). In such settlements, it has long been recognized that 'most older people make significant contributions to the productive and reproductive functions of their households' (Gorman and Heslop, 2000: 1149). Put differently, older people form part of the 'connective tissue, often unpredictable, anchoring urban life in popular neighbourhoods across the urban world' (McFarlane and Silver, 2017: 463). In navigating social and spatial (im)mobilities into old age, they become an integral part of the urban social infrastructure.

VI Navigating intergenerationality and (inter)dependency

Adopting a social navigation lens can also reveal new dimensions of what Brenner and Schmidt (2015: 166) have called the moment of 'concentrated urbanisation' as African cities expand in new ways (see also Myers, 2011; Pieterse, 2011; Schindler, 2017). The sheer multiplicity of new configurations of social relationships has created novel problems for older people to solve but at the same time has generated new opportunities for them to exploit (see Wignall et al., 2019). In contrast to a policy context that frequently separates older people 'from wider morally binding membership in

society' (Sumich, 2016: 822; cf. Ferguson, 2013), gerontological, geographical and medical literatures concerning African contexts highlight the ways in which older people are embedded in complex social (and moral) networks which are constantly in flux. These networks are comprised of children, grandchildren, siblings, extended family, friends, religious organizations, secular social support, and other informal interactions, which reveals the extensive (inter)dependencies across (and within) generations and interconnections between informal and formal social support. Close parallels are evident here with research on the geographies of ageing in Asian contexts, where it has been noted that 'intergenerational solidarity is best understood within the context of collective expectations and familial obligations related to the ageing of individuals' (Desai and Tye, 2009: 1018).

In sub-Saharan Africa, then, the role of older people may be even more crucial to maintaining social cohesion. As Aboderin (2012: 72) has argued, 'through their roles and the way they execute them, older people directly influence younger generations' capability for, and perspectives on, economic engagement', fostering forms of 'intergenerational intelligence', which can help fulfil vital socio-economic needs, especially at times of crisis or change. Older people, therefore, often occupy active roles within webs of contingent and situated transgenerational caring relations, which may be tested in ruptured urban contexts (McQuaid et al., 2018). For instance, within urban households these intergenerational care responsibilities are increasingly shaped by the extensive co-residence of older adults with younger generations through 'intimately-shared physical and social space' (Aboderin et al., 2017: 10). Family support practices are, therefore, at 'the crux of social security' in many African contexts, especially where urban welfare systems are non-existent or at breaking point, enabling urban residents to devise tactics and strategies to navigate

precarious economic conditions, as theorized by Vigh (2009) and of particular pertinence for older people. For example, in Tanzania, care arrangements differ markedly between rural and urban settings, with elder-to-elder care more prevalent in rural settings where young people have moved on (Van Eeuwijk, 2016). Here care is enacted through multiple everyday practices such as bringing water and praying together, which shift radically in relation to the urban or rural setting (Van Eeuwijk, 2016). However, normative discourses on intergenerational relations, care support and kinship obligations remain notably uniform with 'the high expectations of old people in need of care, who state that their children must provide care' (Van Eeuwijk, 2016: 87). This illustrates the disjuncture between persistent moral norms and everyday practices stretched further by rapid processes of urbanization (Van Eeuwijk, 2016: 87).

Particularly in urban settings, the 'ideal view of intergenerational indebtedness' does not, however, often tally with 'real care arrangements', where structural adjustment, neoliberalization and fragmentation of the urban landscape conspire to transform traditional intergenerational care, support systems and networks (Ferreira, 2008). As some authors argue, family care is in 'crisis', accelerated and exposed by rapid, unchecked urbanization (Aboderin, 2006; Hoffman and Pype, 2016; Van der Geest, 2002, 2016), specific polces of urban dispossession (Doherty 2017) and rising inequalities between increasingly diverse urban residents (Buffel et al., 2012; Finlay et al., 2020). In Burkina Faso, an 'inversion' of the intergenerational contract, whereby kinship ties provide the foundation for networks of reciprocal care-giving relations between younger and older generations, has been observed. Young people are either leaving for the city or dreaming of migrating, resulting in a care deficit. Youth are also failing to establish independent households, continuing to depend on their family, when ideally they should be supporting their

elderly parents (Roth, 2008). The points raised here resonate with seminal work on geographies of ageing in Asia by Desai and Tye (2009: 1013), where they note that amidst rapid rural-urban migration 'there is widespread concern over the decline of the family, its stability and "effectiveness" to cater for the needs of the elderly'.

Changes in family support practices, living arrangements and intergenerational roles significantly impact how older people navigate ageing, which affects the nature of older urban residents' social-support exchanges, economic, emotional and physical wellbeing and mobilities (Aboderin, 2006; Kikafunda and Lukwago, 2005; Kimokoti and Hamer, 2008; Kodzi et al., 2011; Roth, 2008; Van der Geest, 2016). In Uganda, while the norm is for aged parents to be cared for by their adult children, multiple reasons including death, ill-health and migration often leave older urban residents without care and instead continuing to provide care (Nyanzi, 2009: 472). 'Surrogate-mothering of grandchildren' is reportedly an overwhelming reality for many elderly women across Africa (Schatz, 2007: 150). In South Africa, older women are overrepresented in the HIV/AIDS care economy (Raniga and Simpson, 2011), while in Tanzania, in one third of households an older person (aged 60 years and above) provides major care for another aged individual (Van Eeuwijk, 2016). Such 'elder-to-elder care arrangements' are understood as a 'necessary but also pragmatic adjustment to a rapidly changing urban and rural context' (Van Eeuwijk, 2016: 88).

Oscillating between dependency/independence and marginalization/centrality forces older people in urban contexts to make difficult moral decisions to mitigate the threat of poverty and degradation. In their work on home-based enterprises in the congested urban space of the Ghanaian capital Accra, Gough et al. (2003) describe how older people use a variety of income-generating activities to supplement

remittances and pensions. Due to the composite nature of household income in Accra, older people are not only able to contribute economically well past retirement age but are eager to do so for multiple reasons, 'including the possibility of maintaining some independence and self-esteem' (Gough et al., 2003: 266). For widowed older women in Uganda, maintaining caring responsibilities can represent a strategic choice to mitigate against, and resist, 'loneliness, illness, immobility, and insecurity'; their narratives 'imbued with notions of responsibility, reciprocity, relationship, societal expectations, and obligation' (Nyanzi, 2009: 473–4; see also Varley and Blasco, 2000, for urban Mexico). Some of these women receive remittances from migrant children, while others rely on their own ingenuity to survive, with many becoming traders. Their decision to live as dependants, however, impacts their independence and restricts their ability to find or maintain sexual partners. In other words, the women trade one form of agency for another, neither of which can be polarized as either active or passive (Oswell, 2013). Here we see how a social navigation analytical optic enables a focus on how social forces shape older people's agency as they negotiate their immediate social and spatial positions.

Experiences from Africa also reveal how the ways older people navigate and access the city are shaped not only by their socio-economic resources but also by their diverse biographies (Wignall et al., 2019). Their present positions and capabilities encompass complex and dynamic life histories comprising shifting (and sometimes fractured) statuses, aspirations, imaginaries and relations, which are connected to spatial histories and trajectories. In a study that traced the 'public life course' of a single civil servant in Botswana, Werbner (2004) demonstrates how the life courses of older people are both fractured and interrupted, deeply implicated in webs of historical, social and political meanings. For some older people, this enables

them to play a vital broker role between generations and across different intergenerational factions, acting as conduits for social memory and shared values, as has been shown in fragile and conflict-affected settings (Boersch-Supan, 2012).

More dramatic and sudden reconfigurations of both social relations and differing symbolic understandings of (inter)generational relations that occur across the life course in relation to broader geopolitical events and trends are also apparent. Van Dongen (2005) uses biographies of Xhosa older people in South Africa to show how painful past experiences and memories of social and political change make present survival and intergenerational relations more difficult, leading to the increased isolation of people as they age. Many of these feelings of disenfranchisement are linked to space, place and mobility, with historical rural-urban hierarchies linked to apartheid spatial exclusion mapped onto present rural-urban disparities. As (Dongen, 2005: 526) claims, 'Social and cultural ruptures, insecure positions and many other hardships have harmed inter-generational relations, to the extent that many older people have lost contact with their children and neighbours as well as their respect and care'. Past experiences of trauma, therefore, need to be recognized and evaluated more subtly if inclusive urban policies are to be harnessed in pursuit of more just urban futures. Furthermore, while there is a growing literature that focuses on changing intergenerational relationships in relation to traumatic events, it is equally important to consider the impacts of everyday experiences of both geographical and historical insecurity that permeate experiences of quotidian life in African cities (Gough et al., 2016; Pieterse and Parnell; 2014; Thieme; 2018).

These cases demonstrate the persistent contributions older people make to urban socio-economic cohesion. They occupy active positions within dense exchange relationships that comprise dynamic inter- and transgenerational

support systems, revealing some of the complex ways in which older people navigate a multiplicity of spaces and states of being to survive in rapidly changing socio-economic urban landscapes. Moreover, older people often represent an essential – yet frequently under-recognized – element of the urban social infrastructures that enable African cities to function (McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Simone, 2004; Wignall et al., 2019), which offers a route for geographies of ageing to link debates about developing 'age-friendly' cities to ideas of 'urban citizenship' and the right of all citizens to make full use of the city (Buffel et al., 2012: 607; Lemanski, 2017). Geographies of ageing can thus attend to the diversity within and between older urban populations, recognizing older people as competent and dynamic social actors utilizing multiple forms of agency within and between urban spaces (Boersch-Supan, 2012; Werbner, 2004), whilst also situating an analysis of older people within the complex context of precarity, inequality and potential inequalities that urban residents contend with on a daily basis (Doherty, 2017).

VII Conclusions

This paper demonstrates how a focus on insights from urban settings in low- and middle-income countries encourages researchers and policymakers to confront the multiple ways of becoming, being and identifying as 'old' and/or as an 'elder'. We argue that focusing on the lived experiences and subjectivities of older urban Africans through a conceptual lens which combines 'social navigation' and 'social infrastructure' approaches can potentially disrupt the reductive policies and conceptualizations of ageing and being 'age-friendly' circulating in urban policy and development discourses. As shown, such policies tend to overlook the complexity of older people's decision-making processes and how they anticipate, manage, react to and reflect on the flows and disjunctures of

contemporary life in urban African contexts (cf. Aboderin, 2012; Nyanzi, 2009).

The conceptual approach proposed in this paper extends these policy debates, whilst offering a further contribution to postcolonial scholarship on African urban that seeks to move away from the failed modernization narrative by foregrounding everyday realities and circumstances. An additional way to emphasize and articulate the 'generative powers of the ordinary' (Pieterse, 2013: 10), and thereby subtly disrupt 'mainstream global urbanism by attending to the tactics of survival and subversion resorted to by subaltern or subordinated populations' (Sheppard et al., 2013: 897), has therefore been proposed. This approach makes it possible to identify geographies of ageing that can help urban policymakers better recognize older people as competent and dynamic social actors utilizing multiple forms of agency within and between the interstitial spaces of the city. Consequently, to assist Robinson's (2016: 3) call to 'open urban studies to a more global repertoire of potential insights', we urge greater consideration of theories emerging from the Global South. We do so while conscious of our reliance in this paper primarily on theoretical insights from scholars from or based in Global North higher education institutions.

Significantly, and counter to trends in current urban governance and policies that foreground youth as urban actors, our engagement with literature recounting the experience of older people in African contexts illustrates how older people deploy their agency through social and spatial (im)mobilities, intergenerational relations and (inter)dependencies. As they do so, older people shape and are shaped by urban dynamics. Accordingly, we argue for a relational, situated approach to geographies of ageing that builds on Vigh's (2009) theory of 'social navigation' to engage with this multiplicity of agency and analyse how people find ways to improve their life chances as they become older amidst complex histories of

inequality and inequity. In this way, we can better attune geographies of ageing to how older people navigate not only the physical city but also 'social infrastructure', including shifting and ambiguous intergenerational relationships, identities, expectations, and (inter)dependencies embedded in local politics and hierarchies. This is critical to geographies of ageing and urban studies, both within and beyond Africa, because it points to a need to better conceptualize older people's exclusion from processes of urban governance, planning and regeneration. It also indicates how older people are creatively resisting and reproducing structural processes as key elements within dynamic and complex urban infrastructures.

In closing, it is important to note that exploring geographies of ageing as proposed above qualifies policy narratives that categorize groups of people as either producers or consumers, and paint those in need of welfare, state assistance and social protection as a drain on resources (Ferguson, 2013). It is this conflation of material and pastoral needs with negative connotations of dependency, by urban-dwellers, policymakers and NGO-workers alike, that perpetuates the coupling of older people with inaction and a lack of participation in urban processes. Yet, as this paper has shown, such a narrative hinders efforts to reveal the 'elusive essence of African cities' (Pieterse, 2011: 6), and obscures the role Southern urbanism can and should play in urbanism theory making more broadly (Roy, 2011; Schindler, 2017). Moreover, this narrative overlooks how particular urban contexts shape older people's everyday tactics for seizing opportunities and navigating urban social and material landscapes, and how in turn urban space itself comes to be shaped by older people. Our overarching conclusion is, therefore, that focusing on the lived experiences and subjectivities of older populations in urban Africa is analytically productive in two significant ways. First, it reveals how urban contexts shape older people's everyday tactics for seizing opportunities and navigating urban social and material landscapes, and how in turn urban space comes to be shaped by older people. Second, it demonstrates why a more substantive dialogue between urban ageing policy and empirical insights on ageing in low- and middle-income countries can help to create new forms of knowledge that are more equitable and just, both epistemologically and in their policy impacts.

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Note

1. This paper uses the term mobility to refer to the ability to move but draws on the so-called 'mobilities paradigm' to place mobility/immobility on a spectrum incorporating imagined and potential mobilities (motilities) alongside physical mobilities and forms of transport mobilities (Rigg, 2008).

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