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Place (in)securities: Older adults' perceptions across urban environments in the United Kingdom

Abstract: This paper explores empirical accounts of perceived insecurities and accompanying issues that make urban place problematic and can impact older adults' wellbeing and overall quality of life. Findings reported derive from the project "Place-Making with Older People: Towards Age-Friendly Communities" which investigates both barriers and facilitators to developing age-friendly cities. Drawing on interviews with older adults in three cities in the United Kingdom (UK), the analysis demonstrates that physical and social vulnerabilities along with the characteristics of the built and social environment, play a role in influencing older adults' behaviours, routines and habits in the community. The results are discussed with a view of influencing practice and policy priorities relating to age-friendly cities.

Keywords: public space; coping strategies; age-friendly cities.

Introduction

A growing body of research on public spaces in urban environments has identified the central role of place in people's experiences of health and wellbeing (Bornioli, Parkhurst & Morgan, 2018; Cattell, Dines, Gesler & Curtis, 2008; Finlay, Franke, McKay & Sims-Gould, 2015) and community life including aspects of place identity, belonging and attachment (Buffel et al., 2014; Phillipson, 2007; Scharf, Phillipson & Smith, 2003). For older adults, particularly, a spatial and affective attachment to their home and community, to *being-in-place*, is crucial to their wellbeing (Rowles, 2017 cited in Finlay, Gaugler & Kane, 2018), as these are places where everyday life unfolds (Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve & Allen, 2012). Furthermore, the physical and social characteristics of the neighbourhood, appear as relevant contexts that

may affect activities, routines and behaviour (Day, 2008; Michael, Green & Farquhar, 2006). For instance, empirical studies have found that positive perceptions of neighbourhood safety encourage social interaction and mutual aid (Baum & Palmer, 2002), whereas people who perceived the environment unsafe tend to alter their outdoor activities and routines (McGinn, Evenson, Herring, Huston & Rodriguez, 2008), leading to a negative sense of community (Lund, 2002). Thus, these aspects should be highlighted within an ageing society and age-friendly policy agenda.

Criminology, sociology and psychology theorists have attempted to explain the complex interplay between the subjective fear of crime or perceived insecurity and the objective risk of victimisation (*e.g.* Farrall, Jackson & Gray, 2009; Hardyns & Pauwels, 2010; Sampson, 2012). According to the fear of crime literature, "perceptions can be a powerful and independent factor that may affect people through different pathways than *actual experiences"* (Wood et al., 2008, p. 16 emphasis added). Thus, whilst fear of crime can impact perceptions of safety, feelings of insecurity are driven by factors embedded in the built and social environment. These include fears or anxieties concerning noise, litter, traffic, vandalism, street harassment, poor housing, overcrowding, or potentially threatening social groups (Amin, 2006; Sandercock, 2000).

Numerous studies have concluded that older adults are more likely to experience feelings of insecurity and are an at-risk group (*e.g.* Pain, 1997; Warr, 1984). One of the factors explaining this phenomenon is the notion of self-perception of physical and social vulnerability attached to particular social groups. For older adults, these perceptions stem from a limited capacity to cope with 'dangerous' situations, a decreasing family and social support network and representations of unsafe places in local media outlets (Valera-Pertegas

& Guàrdia-Olmos, 2017; Varela, 2008). In this sense, perceived insecurity and accompanying issues make some *places* problematic for older people, at particular times of the day. In this article we provide an account of older adults' experiences of urban place (in)securities, their ways of dealing with these, and outline implications for the delivery of age-friendly cities.

Method

This article derives from a three-year ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded project examining enablers and barriers to creating age-friendly communities that promote healthy and active ageing. The research was subject to Heriot-Watt University's ethical review process and research governance. The qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was set to gain in-depth understandings about the diversity of older adults' lived-experiences in the urban environment and how these experiences are underpinned by physical, social and psychological factors. We employed an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014); a holistic exploration of both individual and social phenomena to uncover reality through older adults' views, needs and experiences of urban place insecurities.

We selected nine neighbourhoods across three cities in the United Kingdom (UK) (Edinburgh, Glasgow and Manchester), representing a broad range of urban areas in each city, in terms of urban development, demographic characteristics and levels of social and economic deprivation. Our fieldwork was undertaken over a ten-month period (2016-2017); comprising 102 semi-structured interviews (between 25-150 minutes long) with older adults (aged 60 to 92) conducted at participants' homes or public places of their choosing (e.g. coffee shops, community centres). Participants were recruited via contacts in existing community groups and snowballing techniques. The interviews covered issues of sense of place, community barriers and enablers, physical and social environmental experiences, and

potential age-friendly improvements. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

Interview transcripts were organised, read and discussed using a thematic analysis approach; we worked towards identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within our data set aiming to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences of navigating urban space. Our analytical approach was both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (driven by research questions). Guided by Braun and Clarke's approach (2006), this systematic and iterative analytical process involved: (1) familiarising ourselves with the transcripts (noting initial ideas on the margins): (2) generating initial codes; (3) merging codes (identifying patterns in the data); (4) searching for themes (collating codes into potential themes, gathering all relevant data for each potential theme); (5) reviewing themes (confirming themes work in relation to coded transcripts extracts); (6) defining themes (refining the specifics of each theme, creating clear names and descriptions); and (7) producing a report (interpreting the whole data set, relating back to the research questions and literature).

Our analysis generated three main themes on older adults' experiences of neighbourhood and place: 'place familiarity and perceptions of security', 'paradoxical vulnerability and public space', and 'place appropriation and managing place insecurities'. Below we focus on place insecurities and the ways older people deal with and manage insecurities in the context of urban space.

Place familiarity and perceptions of security

Across all nine neighbourhoods, participants reflected on place and neighbourhood in terms of a sense of familiarity, embodied through everyday civilities and habitual routines exchanged within the community. Previous research has identified the importance of

neighbourhood as places of meaningful 'encounters', where engaging with and coming into face-to-face contact with others can facilitate a sense of connection within community; thereby conferring a local insider status (Hay, 1998 cited in Finlay et al., 2018, p. 3). More importantly, place familiarity not only reinforced participants' physical, social and autobiographical attachment or *insideness* (Rowles, 1983) to their neighbourhood but their sense of security and safety. Knowing that neighbours were looking out for each other was an important factor affecting perceptions of place and older adult's activities, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> I'd rather walk round here at two-three in the morning than go up the town and walk. Everybody knows everybody else, even the older ones. They've got their families here, and they know who they are. I think we feel safer because we know who we know. […]. We feel safe in our own community (67-year-old female, Craigmillar, Edinburgh)

> This is a tight-knit community, everybody knows everybody. Everybody knows everybody's business, you can't do nothing. But it's good to know that you can walk out your door, you're going to be safe (60-year-old female, Easterhouse, Glasgow)

This notion of neighbours looking out for each other was not defined as emotional 'closeness' or interpersonal intimacy but as a source of dependence in times of adversity (*e.g.* being taken ill, needing help moving heavy items), which provided residents with a sense of security and safety when ageing in the community. In this sense, the social connections that older adults developed within the immediate community imbued place with protective qualities. In the following quote, this form of place protection was visible when older adults would intervene to ensure the wellbeing of other residents:

> I've got another friend who lives about 100-yards away in a tenement. He was taken

> ill in Princes Street some months ago […] anyway bottom line is we swapped keys and things. He has a routine; most people do get into a routine. If I don't see him for a day or two I'll go and rap on the door (72-year-old male, Morningside, Edinburgh)

As indicated earlier, positive perceptions of safety and security are conducive to developing a stronger sense of community, which is evident in participants' accounts of 'being looked after' or 'being known' in their neighbourhoods. Older adults living in more deprived communities were more likely to report a stronger sense of place familiarity and feelings of safety, and were much less apprehensive in using the neighbourhood, particularly in the evening (*i.e.* Baguley, Craigmillar, Easterhouse). Conversely, it was in the least deprived communities where place insecurities were more acutely felt. In neighbourhoods experiencing social segregation (*e.g.* Govanhill) there was a weaker place familiarity and higher perception of insecurity; and for many it was the eroding of social support in old age that led to feelings of unsafety and vulnerability.

Paradoxical vulnerability and public space

According to the 'fear of victimisation paradox' older people tend to report greater levels of perceived insecurity/unsafety whilst experiencing lower victimisation rates, when compared to other social groups (Hough & Mayhew, 1983 cited in De Donder, Buffel, Dury, De Witte, & Verté, 2013, p. 918). Participants' accounts regarding perceptions of crime echoed such paradox as only very few participants had actual experience of crime. Older adults' feelings of insecurity often stemmed from concerns about place maintenance and physical and social features of the environment; concerns they constantly negotiated in terms of their changing physical bodies and social support to access and use urban space. Place insecurities were centred around 'vulnerability'; a reflection of the participants' perception of their capacity to avoid crime or defend themselves in dangerous/risky situations (Allik & Kearns, 2016).

Additionally, older adults often wanted to exert control and their right to use public space, especially if physical barriers (*e.g.* potholes, fruit stands, business boards) and social barriers (*e.g.* disorder, insensitivity and lack of respect) made it a hostile environment, yet often felt unable to do so. Many older adults felt unsafe and wary when moving around the community which impacted their confidence to manage situations:

> When you're older you're more vulnerable. I'm finding I'm losing that bravery, if you like. You feel more vulnerable as you're getting older and I can feel it now more. It's a terrible world, isn't it! […] now I'm less likely to say something. I don't know whether it's because it's getting worse now or whether it's just because I'm getting older (67-year-old female, Rusholme, Manchester)

In this sense, feelings of vulnerability in the community were built on and perhaps contributed to a culture of fear. Notions of embodied capabilities combined with environmental attributes also contributed to assessments of community and social insecurity, as expressed below, where the emotional impact of negotiating physical space were also evident.

> I don't have the same confidence as I did when I was 70, you know? I just try to keep aggravation away, but for some reason […] I seem to draw them to me. […] When I was 70 I didn't mind that because I knew I could handle it, but now I couldn't handle it, you know? I can't go out now (86-year-old male, Morningside, Edinburgh)

> If you're going to visit friends, to the shops, to clubs, you've got all these things to negotiate. Like dangerous roads, snow and ice, whatever, the distance involved and so on […] it's just that, oh god, you know, do I need all that grief? (78-year-old female, Partick, Glasgow)

Pavements and kerbs were particularly problematic for those with mobility and visual impairments, and some mentioned that street spaces failed to reflect the needs of older adults in terms of supporting accessibility and inclusivity. Uncertainty about what spaces were safe to walk on and changing environmental conditions were considerations for participants when thinking about safety and age-friendly communities:

> I fell over and that was because of an uneven pavement and so I've become very wary about where I walk. […] But also taking them up so regularly and laying them down and so even though you might think one month "Oh, this bit's a bit uneven", the next month it'll be that bit (66-year-old female, Leith, Edinburgh)

For many, 'fear of falling' created a barrier to leaving the home. This embodied and environmentally situated vulnerability and consequent lack of confidence had social implications as older adults chose to 'stay in' and withdraw rather than engage in the neighbourhood; many felt socially excluded. Fear of falling was also evident when using public transport. Many participants felt that that there was a lack of sensitivity amongst transport providers and users which often discouraged use:

> It's terrible on the buses. I have to say to them [*drivers*] 'will you let me sit down please before you move'. I don't use the buses now, although I've got my bus pass. I'm frightened now of falling again, you know, especially the buses when they jerk and there's people behind you and they push you (92-year-old female, Baguley, Manchester)

These accounts support Goldsmith's (2011) notion of 'architectural disability', where the design of public space confronted older adults with barriers and hazards, making the environment uncomfortable and unsafe to use, which exacerbates self-perceived

vulnerabilities and excludes older adults from participating in the community. Responding to these place insecurities, some participants developed specific strategies to negotiate public space.

Place appropriation and managing place insecurities

Older adults' accounts of perceived insecurities around public space evidence the influence of embodied and situated environmental factors on behaviours with many adopting place 'avoidance strategies' (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981) to manage safety-related issues. For instance, the presence of obstacles in the street often forced many participants - especially women – to come out at certain times of the day or take alternative routes to reach their destination. Some even avoided using local shops and cash-machines for fear of being mugged, whilst others would consciously map 'safer' routes by walking on well-lit streets or avoiding certain zones of the neighbourhood that were deemed 'no-go' areas. For others, strategies included adopting modes of travel that meant they spent less time traversing public space, such as taxis or relying upon friends and family as a mode of transport. The following quotes illustrate some of those strategies:

> Tomorrow night I've got a cook session meeting, but I get a lift up and a lift back because the meeting is at night at 7:30 and I don't like hanging about bus stops at night. So, one of my friends in the church comes and collects me for that and brings me back home (78-year-old female, Partick, Glasgow)

> It shook me a little bit [incidence of crime] but then I thought I'll go in future along the main street where it's lit-up. That's why I take the car often at night and park it. I'm now fairly sensible with where I walk and when I walk in the dark (67-year-old female, Didsbury, Manchester)

Others opted for walking on busy streets because to them an increased street-life reduced perceived insecurity and supported their engaging in public spaces:

> I think that because you feel comfortable in where you live you also feel safe in where you live. We all work on the principle the more people who are out walking the safer it is, the better it is. And we're of an age where we aren't doing Kung Fu anymore (78-year-old female, Rusholme, Manchester)

Negative media portrayal and stigma attached to certain places also had an impact on the way participants navigated, appropriated or felt marginalised in public space. Although some older adults internalised social representations of their neighbourhood as an unsafe and dangerous place, others were keen to challenge this in a clear attempt to change people's perceptions of insecurity whilst others preferred not to dwell on negative stigma:

> Craigmillar has a terrible reputation but I've never once felt threatened, news have been negative towards us. People don't like it. It's an assumption people make. (60-year-old female, Craigmillar, Edinburgh)

> It doesn't worry me. There are people who do, and people read their newspapers and read horrible things and think that could happen here. I can't be bothered with that. I really can't (80-year-old female, Partick, Glasgow)

Some older adults deliberately used the so-called 'invisibility' of old age to their advantage when navigating public spaces - invisibility makes them feel safe. As one 65-year-old woman in Govanhill mentioned: "young guys standing in the corner don't see me, it's like I'm in another plane". Others often adopted specific strategies to remain 'visible', which some felt

had the potential to objectify and stigmatise older adults by highlighting weakness and vulnerability, as illustrated below:

> A lady in the community now has had to buy herself a high vis vest to cross the road because she's terrified that the traffic won't see her. It's stigmatising, isn't it? She's not said anything about that, but that's my perception of it. And buses tend to not stop for her either if they don't see her. So that's why she does it as well (65-year-old female, Rusholme, Manchester)

Concluding discussion

Drawing on theoretical understandings relating to perceptions of insecurity/safety and the impact of the built and social environment on people's sense of place, in this article we analysed older adults' experiences of vulnerability and marginalisation in public space across nine neighbourhoods in the UK. A qualitative methodology was employed to explore the varied nuances of older adults' lived-experiences of urban place insecurities, and thus it is crucial to consider the study's context when interpreting the findings as these primarily reflect the research participants' views and perceptions.

In line with the literature (Baum & Palmer, 2002; Day, 2008; Lund, 2002; McGinn et al., 2008; Michael, Green, & Farquhar, 2006), our findings emphasise the central role of the physical and social features of the urban environment in shaping perceptions of safety and security in the lives of older adults. Participants' responses to feeling insecure often compromised the ability to navigate outdoor spaces and access community settings; disrupting their social interactions, behaviours, routines and habits in the community.

The findings revealed the need to shift towards a broader understanding of perceptions of safety and security, beyond notions of 'fear of crime' to including factors such as accessibility and usability of public space, and involvement with other residents. A strong

sense of place familiarity and autobiographical attachment, or what Rowles (1983) termed 'insideness', provided older adults with positive perceptions of safety/security. Participants living in more deprived communities were more likely to report stronger sense of place familiarity and much less apprehension in using the neighbourhood, which encouraged feelings of inclusion and protection. This finding contradicts previous research that suggest that levels of support, trust and feelings of safety tend to be lower in disadvantaged areas (Allik & Kearns, 2016). In neighbourhoods where social segregation was prominent and perceived place familiarity was lower, participants often expressed fear of using outdoor spaces.

Our findings also identified the ways in which older adults developed strategies in response to feelings of place insecurity. Whilst some withdrew from community in response to feeling insecure, others adopted specific strategies in relation to place use. This suggests that far from being passive actors in response to insecurity, older adults consciously adopt place response mechanisms and re-negotiate spaces in different ways (*see* De Donder et al., 2013; Sandercock, 2000; Wood et al., 2008). In determining solutions and interventions, it is important that the knowledge and experience of older adults are effectively utilised to design and deliver age-friendly cities which are safer and more secure; a key aspect that has also been highlighted in Buffel's (2018) work as a means of co-researching with older adults. This will allow older people a greater sense of community and opportunities to come together to identify strategies to support engagement in urban spaces.

Lastly, notions of place were deeply embedded in the experiences of older adults. Whilst sense of place and aspects of place attachment, identity and belonging have been afforded attention in the literature, there has been a lack of empirical work exploring these concepts in

311 relation to the design and delivery of age-friendly cities and communities. Although
312 prevention and policing services are important, we need to find ways to support people to feel
313 more confident and secure in their communities through approaches to place management
314 that reflect individual and collective responses to the use of urban space. This requires a
315 closer articulation of place in the design of interventions that support active ageing in the
316 community.
317

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