Directions in Environmental Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Field

Hal Kendig, MPl, PhD¹

This article considers developments and directions for environmental gerontology drawing on the three papers in this Forum. The multidisciplinary field came of age during the 1960s with Powell Lawton’s powerful environmental press paradigm and its applications to empirical research and building design. Recent theoretical developments in Europe and America have advanced and integrated concepts in psychology, geography, and related disciplines. Time dimensions and active use of space are essential for understanding aging individuals and microenvironments as well as changing populations and macroenvironments. Research on residential environments by health professions is informing community care that is enhancing the independence and well-being of older people. With its proven responsiveness to social and policy priorities, environmental gerontology is now providing strong conceptual and empirical bases for advancing healthy aging and age-friendly societies.

The Forum targeting environmental gerontology is particularly valuable at this time because it brings renewed momentum to the advancement of an important field that had slowed during the 1990s. Hans-Werner Wahl’s writings (e.g., 2001) are part of a European resurgence that has added to the considerable body of American literature represented in The Forum in this issue by Laura Gitlin, Stephen Golant, and Gerald Weisman. Their papers are of great value in themselves, and they also provide a sound base for drawing out broader themes in research on environmental gerontology and its applications. These concerns include the place of theory in (and for) applied fields in gerontology, the influence on knowledge of research funding, and changing public constructions underlying programs and services concerning older people and their environments.

The Forum also provides a welcome testimonial to the landmark contributions made by Powell Lawton. As one of countless personal stories about Powell, mine began while I was a graduate student at the USC Andrus Gerontology Center in the early 1970s. All of us in the Environmental Studies Laboratory at the time were captivated not only by his powerful environmental press (E-P) paradigm, but also by his friendliness, humility, and overwhelming commitment to older people. While showing us valuable ways of thinking, he demonstrated his conviction that the core of gerontology should be research-based knowledge for older people. At that time his research mainly concerned applications for vulnerable older people in public housing and poor neighborhoods. At the 1997 International Congress on Gerontology in Adelaide, 25 years later, he was just as animated discussing the injustices of QUALY economics methodology (because it devalued people with short life expectancies) and the usefulness of his new research instruments for measuring quality of life for older people with dementia in residential care. For Powell Lawton, who chose to work from the Philadelphia Geriatric

¹Facility of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, Australia.
Center throughout his pioneering research career, it was not possible to separate theory, methods, ethics, and practical value—and no important topic was too hard for him.

The articles in this forum build on Lawton’s legacy and provide a valuable contrast of theory, methods, and professional applications in environmental gerontology. Wahl and Weissman (2003) provide a wide conceptual and historical sweep, building on the person–environment paradigm and its roots in psychology and geography. The Golant (2003) article develops fundamental issues of time and space as well as insights from anthropological and other qualitative perspectives. The Gitlin (2003) article reflects powerful new perspectives from a collaboration with health professionals who design and adapt home environments that can reinforce the independence and well-being of older individuals. This commentary concludes with some thoughts on the significance and gaps in current knowledge in environmental gerontology and related policy directions.

Environmental Gerontology at the Beginning of the New Millennium

Wahl and Weissman (2003) undertake a valuable quest to locate environmental issues in the high ground of theory in gerontology. Their quest is important not only given the value of good theory itself—nothing is as practical as good theory—but also for the recognition and status afforded by theoretical standing. Theory underpins scientific knowledge because it provides the crucial explanatory and conceptual bases for developing and testing the hypotheses and propositions that build knowledge and understanding. As the authors point out, environmental gerontology has a rich theoretical tradition stretching back to the classic ecology of the Chicago School of urban sociology in the 1920s, the environmental psychology of Barker (1968), and the high-water mark of Lawton’s environmental press in the 1970s. It is painful for the authors to note, as they do in their honesty, that there was no environmental chapter in the influential *Handbook of Theories of Aging* at the end of the millennium (Bengtson & Schaie, 1999).

What does one make of the limited recognition of theory in environmental gerontology? To begin, one can only reinforce the authors’ observation that the seminal work on environmental press, so clearly articulated by Lawton and Nahemow (1973), was rich with theoretical promise. However, this potential has remained largely unfulfilled because few empirical studies have rigorously explicated and tested E-P hypotheses as required to build a coherent body of knowledge. For example, where are the classic environmental studies comparable with Irving Rop–sow’s (1967) *Social Integration of the Aged?* The disappointment is heightened because the fully developed E-P model, as per Parmelee and Lawton (1990), yields crucial insights into contemporary concerns. The model recognizes the dynamic interaction between individual action (not passivity) and environmental influences, and it has concern for higher outcomes such as well-being as well as lower level functioning. The practical value of these concepts is obvious, and the E-P focus on processes accords well with the prescripts of Bengtson and Schaie (1999) for the explanatory dimension of good theory.

Environmental perspectives have been valuable for theoretical development in related subdisciplines or fields, which may soften Wahl and Weisman’s concerns. The increasing emphasis on “place”—within and across anthropological, psychological, and sociological theory—arguably reflects underlying strength rather than fragmentation of the environmental field. Having loose boundaries to environmental aspects of aging can facilitate the building of conceptual bridges across disciplines. Although the field has yet to evolve a suite of validated measures for key concepts, it may not be wise to have too many uniform indicators while there remains conceptual uncertainty and new substantive ground to be explored. For a field with a plurality of concepts and applications, there are some advantages in allowing a thousand flowers to blossom on the edges of established orthodoxies. Further, as the authors recognize, theory itself is under the critical gaze of postmodern relativism and few governments have been convinced of its social value in addressing practical problems. Yet notwithstanding these comments, one can only agree with the authors that ongoing theoretical synthesis and reflection, as demonstrated by their article here, is essential to critically assess developments in the field and focus research efforts on promising directions.

Finally, the Wahl and Weisman article provides valuable insights into the changing foci of research in environmental gerontology. They note that over the 1990s there has been an overall trend toward more publications (and presumably more research) on the private home environment; relatively less publication on the (previously dominant) institutional environment; and some growth, followed by a modest decline, of publications on residential decision making. To their observations I would underscore the astonishing paucity of research on the macro-environments of neighborhoods, regions, and urban–rural divides that are so significant in structuring experiences of aging.

It is notable that research agendas in environmental gerontology had been influenced strongly by the U.S. national housing programs of the 1970s and 1980s but that this research subsequently waned along with the programs themselves. Although health and social research on aging was supported strongly by the National Institute on Aging during the 1990s, the Institute has provided relatively little
support for environmental research. Research in environmental gerontology continues to reflect the tensions between its substantive origins in the architecture and planning professions and its theoretical impetus from psychology and geography.

**Conceptualizing Time and Behavior**

Stephen Golant (2003) has a distinguished record as a geographer who has related spatial issues to the decision making of older individuals, including residential mobility and its consequences. Consistent with Lawton’s later conceptions of his environmental press model, Golant’s essay focuses on the active and intended dimensions of older people as they “use, manipulate, or perform tasks in their environments.” This valuable perspective underscores the potential of the environment to facilitate or impede activities that are sought, valued, or necessary for older people. Although these ideas are well established, as evidenced by the vintage of many of the references, they are important reminders that what matters most are the outcomes for older people. Further, older people’s own views and intentions are essential for understanding processes by which they choose (or in some cases find themselves) in various environmental settings.

Golant makes a convincing case for taking more account of time in environmental gerontology. He argues, correctly in my view, that present research in the field concentrates on a range of “snapshots” rather than the time sequences that better characterize people’s lives. His theoretical logic, supported by reference to indicative studies, suggests that people’s experiences of a current environment are influenced by the context and meaning of their past environments as well as by their anticipation of the future. Further, the same environmental features or changes can have either positive or negative impacts on different older individuals and their own sense of self. Indeed, the meaning and use of home can be inseparable from life continuity and identity. Finally, personal changes in the competencies and other characteristics of older people both influence and interact with environments and their consequences.

Why has there been so little attention to time in environmental gerontology? This is surprising because aging itself must concern time, and life-span perspectives have been central to gerontology since the 1980s. Further, psychologists and anthropologists have long adopted life history approaches; demographers analyze housing “careers” and disablement processes; and geriatricians refer to trajectories of illness (acute, chronic, and acute on chronic). The answers may rest in the applied emphases and relative isolation of the environmental field—another argument for better integration through multidisciplinary theory and research. The difficulties of relating residential experiences to other life experiences do not appear to be methodological. For example, although residential careers are seldom included in life history or prospective surveys, they are not inherently more difficult to measure than are employment and family histories. When these opportunities are taken, the research opportunities can be substantial.

Golant also underscores the value of better understanding the environmental features that facilitate or impede the activities or behaviors of older people. Too few studies pay attention to the places in which older people live their daily lives. I particularly wish to emphasize the value of saliency, that is, the importance that particular environmental features may have for each older person and the reasons underlying these saliencies. Taxonomies of activities and settings are useful, as argued by Golant, but we need to remember that the early efforts by Barker (1968) and others became bogged down in description that did not yield much in the way of conceptual advances.

As a geographer, Golant would have a good understanding of macrostructural forces, but his article and environmental gerontology focus heavily on individuals and microenvironments. Although people’s environments begin with their residences, they extend to neighborhoods, cities, regions, and other spatial units that are changing in their populations and built forms. For research on time and the environment, there are important macro-dimensions to change, such as aging of the baby boom cohort in postwar suburbs. Broad socioeconomic–political change, which has been analyzed so productively through the powerful age-period-cohort paradigm in sociology, can set a larger context for understanding changes in the fit between older populations and their macroenvironments (Kendig, 1990).

**Conducting Research on Home Environments**

Laura Gitlin’s (2003) paper brings the valuable, relatively new perspectives of a research collaboration with occupational therapists to environmental gerontology. Whereas professional involvement in the field originally focused on architects and urban planners, with support from Administration on Aging traineeships back to the 1960s, the professional focus has reemerged more recently through health professionals. This change reflects rising public concern over recent decades for health and care issues and the corresponding decline of housing and urban issues. The policy trends have corresponded with the emergence of allied health professional practice based increasingly on research knowledge and university education. Indeed, a number of researchers in gerontology began careers in the urban field and now hold appointments in aspects of the health field.

This discussion into recent social and professional history leads naturally to Gitlin’s analysis of the changing context for home environments. She
emphasizes the increasing public recognition of home ownership and community living as the main and most beneficial settings for people growing older. There has been the fortunate and growing convergence of interests between governments wishing to limit care costs and older people wishing to age in place in their own homes. Although these points may seem self-evident now, they contrast sharply with the situation 30 years ago when research, practice, and public attention were devoted largely to the small minority of frail older people in congregate housing and residential care. Further spurs to recent growth of research on the home environment were recognition of environmental influences on the disablement processes, dementia care, and informal caregivers. These broader contextual issues may explain why the U.S. National Institute on Aging has concentrated its relatively small support for environmental research in areas that relate closely to home influences on maintaining older people’s capacities and facilitating their care.

Gitlin sets out the major methodological challenges and benefits of research in the home. One of the greatest challenges is the variability of these settings and their uses as compared with the relative uniformity of institutional settings and routines. Qualitative research has shown that issues of meaning and control are very different for older people who live in somebody else’s workplace (residential care) as compared to those in their own homes, where care workers are the visitors. Research on home hazards, home modifications, and use of aids are difficult but useful because they focus on the ways in which older people actively and dynamically relate to their environment. The theoretical and methodological scope extends to older people with a wider range of competencies, including the higher end, and a wider range of outcomes, including well-being as well as functioning.

The “problem” focus of the occupational therapist, such as on environmental influences on tasks of care and risks of falls, adds a sharpness of insight that complements Golant’s general framework of relating tasks to places. Whereas Golant makes a theoretically based call for following activities through time, Gitlin specifically discusses videotapes of activities such as toileting and the remote measurement of activities and self-care behaviors at home. These bridges between theory, research, and practice are exceptionally important. Occupational therapy approaches begin and end their work in clinical and self-help applications. At the same time, this profession-based research benefits from and contributes to the theoretical and methodological work of environmental gerontology.

Summary

As these three valuable articles have shown, environmental gerontology is a wonderfully productive field that does not have a uniform theory or methodology. Research in the field must constantly face the challenges and benefit from the insights of multidisciplinary perspectives in understanding and resolving “problems” important to the lives of older people. It has been shaped by the early rise and then ebb of support for housing and urban areas as public issues in the United States. More recently, environmental research momentum has been driven by the social and government priority accorded to community care, caregiving, self-care and health promotion, and related concerns for proactive older people who wish to stay healthy and at home. The core ideas of environmental gerontology, as developed by Powell Lawton throughout his life, continue to animate applied research as exemplified in a special journal issue, Housing Choices and Well Being of Older Adults: Proper Fit (Schwarz & Pastalan, 2001).

Broader social trends and policy directions also can be influenced significantly by research on aging and environments. The social and political moves toward an “age-friendly” society, now prominent on the international stage, can be traced fairly directly back to international research showing environmental influences on aging experiences. The International Plan of Action on Ageing (United Nations, 2002) has confirmed “ensuring and enabling supportive environments” as one of the three major priority areas. The Research Agenda on Ageing for the 21st Century, produced by the United Nations Office on Ageing and the International Association of Gerontology (2002) for the Second World Assembly on Ageing, lists research priorities that address environmental determinants of healthy aging and quality of life. If governments, markets, and the public at large are well informed by good research, they can create and preserve environments that effectively and efficiently enable vulnerable older people to maintain their identity, independence, and well-being. Action on behalf of older people benefits greatly from a foundation of research-based knowledge and theory in environmental gerontology.

References


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