

SPATIAL CONCENTRATION OF OLDER PEOPLE – SOME REMARKS ON THE ISSUE

Marek NIEZABITOWSKI

Silesian University of Technology, Faculty of Organization and Management, Department of Applied Social Sciences; Marek.Niezabitowski@polsl.pl, ORCID: 0000 0002 7730 2483

Purpose: The main reasons for writing this paper was to present and discuss some views on spatial concentration of older people as a consequences of demographic aging, so that the complexity of this issue would be clear. The other equally important purposes were drawing attention to the significance of relations of older people to other age groups in their residential environment. Another reason for writing this article was showing that abovementioned relations in different aspects should be studied for a proper shaping of the habitat according to the needs of both younger and the older residents.

Design/methodology/approach: The approach to the issue of the article includes the discussion on both potentially positive and negative consequences of the spatial concentration of older persons. Scientific perspective of the text involved theories, concepts or views emphasizing the importance of social ties of people aged over 60 and the cumulation of the issues of that stage of life for their situation in given area/territory.

Findings: The consequences of spatial concentration of older people are not just obviously negative or positive. It more complex issue and its complexity should be analyzed regarding the individual combination of features of residential environment of older persons in each case.

Originality/value: The article shows that demographic aging and spatial concentration of older people is an important phenomenon as it occurs not only nowadays, but also occurred in history of Europe. The paper discusses both negative and positive consequences of this phenomenon as well as its complexity. It is addressed to sociologists, social workers, specialists in social policy.

Keywords: older people, demographic aging, social ties.

Category of the paper: Viewpoint, Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

Demographic aging is a phenomenon which results in the creation of special places in which the percentage of inhabitants aged over 60 is enormously high. This in turn may have both positive and negative consequences for older people themselves and the rest of society.

One of historical cases of that kind was the plague in 14-th century Europe. At that time statistically plenty of children and young people died, and as a result proportionally many older people stayed alive in rural areas, small towns and cities. That process affected populations in few European countries like: England, Germany, Spain, France, Italy (Minois, 1995). It occurred quite often that these older persons didn't have any support as their younger relatives passed away. So (as a result) in many households there were mostly old people unable to work in their farms. It was a real cumulation of problems connected with old age (Minois, 1995). Many frail old men and women formed big households. Also in numerous cities people in their late years, left without support of the younger, became a real burden. As the same occurred in rural areas spatial concentration of older people emerged as an issue of this period of European history. Two opposite schemes (patterns) of consequences were observed: rather dependency of older people in villages (as they were left without support) or the increased power of senior citizens from higher social classes in Italian cities (Minois, 1995).

Demographic ageing is a process which, according to studies by demographers, has been manifesting itself quite clearly in Poland since at least 2000 (Stańczak, Szałtys, 2016), and what is particularly important, this process concerns not only the whole country and some of its regions, but also cities (Janiszewska, 2019). This means that the proportions of the population of post-productive age in the total population of many cities in our country are increasing. Demographic ageing affects not only the cities themselves, but also districts or housing estates, yet the spatial structure of cities can differ in terms of the percentage of people aged 60 and over - some neighborhoods are rather young demographically, while others are definitely older.

Within social sciences there are some theoretical views on both negative and positive consequences of demographic aging of different habitats. As this phenomenon nowadays also occurs in many postindustrial societies these views are worth discussing.

2. Social ties as an aspect of spatial concentration of older persons

One of the reasons why spatial concentration of older persons becomes a complex issue is the fact that people in their late years differ a lot within their age group as it comes to social characteristics. Spatial concentration of older adults itself does not imply their social activity in local community. As famous sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) stated in one of his articles if social group has too strong social ties it usually means that this group exactly does not have enough information and has no connection with other groups, even those living relatively close. If the group doesn't have contact with other groups they lack precious support in different forms. It practically means that this group is weaker when facing its problems. It could be stronger when having access to the potential solutions and help coming from other groups.

This regularity refers to older people as many of them need support (Krause, 2006). Moreover no matter how much and what kind of support they need they have right to be included in the society or local community, not excluded from it. In case of older adults as a special social category two kinds of isolation has to be considered:

1. Isolation from (and within) their own group.
2. Isolation from the rest of society or local community.

The first type of isolation refers to the cases when elderly people are cut off from their peers due to different reasons. It can be because of belonging to different social groups or social classes, and then it is a product of just social stratification (Harris, 2007) or/and prejudices or just differences. This may mean that older people living in different parts of the same city do not want to have a contact with each other, so there is no cooperation or exchange of experiences. The isolation can also be the result of other differences between older persons, like e.g. in the degree of physical fitness, autonomy and independence if everyday life. Race and ethnicity can also be the reason for no connection or difficulties in connecting older adults of different background. The practical examples of this issue is lack of cooperation between different districts of the town or metropolis when they organize activities or activities are organized for them by services or authorities. Even within the same district or smaller local community of parish or street it is not easy to organize support and help for older residents in neighborhood if necessary.

Additionally some research conducted in 1980-s shown that in specially designed institutions and housing projects for older persons social interactions between them are rare. Moreover less self-efficient older adults and those coming from minority ethnic groups are out of social networks created among their peers in such places (Sheehan, 1986; cf. Rubinstein, Parmelee, 1992, p. 150).

Both types of isolation of older people shown above are negative and can be dangerous for them as they are observed in different social circumstances and spatial conditions. When analyzing different forms of living of older residents in various spaces and places (in urban or rural areas), these two kinds of isolation has to be included as a potential threat in SWOT analysis of a given area.

So trying to answer the question if the spatial concentration of elderly people in given place is positive or negative from the perspective of social interactions and ties, it is worth taking into account a set of arguments which come from theory, research and practice.

If a spatial concentration of older people in urban or rural areas is viewed from the angle of the subculture created by them, two points of view should be included in potential studies. These are the views of Arnold M. Rose and Arlie R. Hochschild. The first of the aforementioned scientists, as recalled previously, is the author of special theory dedicated to subculture of older persons (Rose, 1965), the second, in compliance with this perspective, was conducting qualitative research in a community of older adults living in a specially designed housing project in Merrill Court in USA (Hochschild, 1978). As regards to the concentration of elderly

people in American metropolises Arnold Rose (1965) stated that this process/phenomenon leads to the creation of the aforementioned subculture as people belonging to the same cohort live close to each other, so may have opportunities to get in touch. Moreover, as it was mentioned earlier, according to Granovetter (1973), too strong social ties within given group can lead to the isolation from other groups in its social surroundings. No matter how controversial is the issue, if older adults are concentrated in space, thus relatively close to each other, it means that they have more opportunities to build social networks, moreover their social life has (potential) advantages such as for example:

- more regular pleasurable interactions between peers,
- potentially wide, dense, strong and effective support networks,
- if their social capital is high, they can have an influence on local authorities when struggling for the improvement of their quality of life,
- their peer groups can be created by themselves which implies not only support, but also defines and strengthens social identity, and that practically means belonging to the same age group and generation of a very specific culture with its distinct values, norms, rituals, symbols etc.

The qualities essential for social integration of older adults in the milieu in which they live mostly among their peers are institutionally regulated interactions between senior citizens through special social channels, practices, customs, organizations and facilities. Therefore it is crucial if these structural mechanisms work or not in given space or place in which older adults live very close to each other. If such structures and institutions, like day care facilities, senior clubs, or special organizations for pensioners do not exist in given place, they have to be built by people who belong to this category of inhabitants. If not created by older residents themselves they have to evolve as a result of professional activities of e.g. social workers or other professionals who can stimulate and organize social actions. The abovementioned mechanisms and actions can turn an aggregation of older people into a community or at least effective group with its own goals.

The formation of an effective peer group or community of older adults is an interesting process which occurs differently in various social circumstances. If it starts from scratch in a social milieu which does not have any institutions for people aged 60 and over, it becomes really great challenge. Probably such a rise of a group of older adults who even do not know each other occurs easily when happening in specially designed social situation like living in the same special housing estate or a nursing home.

Such processes in a small scale in special circumstances were revealed by aforementioned Arlie R. Hochschild (1978) in her study of a community of residents of a special housing project. She described these phenomenon after two-year observation of the people who created this community when living together in one place only among their peers. After many years of researching social interactions and practices of older adults she summarized her own and other scientists' studies. As a result of this she concluded that older persons have much more

opportunities to have interactions with their peers when they live in a residential environment in which they are only or mostly among inhabitants of the same age group as theirs. According to Hochschild, living together with their contemporaries turns out to be the best option for older people as regards to their self-integrity and maintaining their social identity.

3. Cumulation of problems of old age in town districts

The aforementioned social identity is bolstered if we consider for example the lives of older adults who spend their late years in old districts of towns. Nonetheless there are also the disadvantages of such a situation. In this case the spatial concentration of people 60 years of age and older may imply cumulation of different problems of that stage of life in the area/residential environment. This issue was described really well by Frąckiewicz (1972). As a result of her wide-ranging studies she concluded that:

The lower standard of flats' furnishings and equipment the higher percentage of older people in the population of residents. This regularity can be observed within a region, towns and districts of towns and cities (Frąckiewicz, 1972, p. 168). This thesis had been proven by the researches described in Polish and foreign literature in 1960-s and 1970-s.

This accumulation contains:

1. Low or even substandard quality of housing environment.
2. Overpopulation in researched housing environment.
3. Low health and physical efficiency of the residents after many years of hard work.
4. Poor condition of health care and nursing.

In spite of these problems older people are attached to their residential environment of a district or housing estate. It is attachment to a social milieu as well as to a place itself. So when Frąckiewicz emphasizes that continuous living in the same "historical district" is crucial for a good quality of life of older inhabitants, two categories well known in environmental psychology become very important:

1. Place attachment (Rowles, 1983, 1984; Rubinstein, Parmelee, 1992).
2. Sense of place (Hummon, 1992).

"Historical" here means district which people memorize and recall with a sentiment. Living in a given place for many years also implies strong social identification with local community. So according to Frąckiewicz's study when relocating older residents of given districts, it is very important to relocate them with other peers from the same district. It is crucial for the remaining still the same sense of place – the feeling that we are in the same place as previously/always, place we accept.

Notwithstanding the great significance of the above mentioned sense of belonging, the potential process regarding such housing environments is degradation which progresses with the individual and demographic aging of residents. The possible solutions to this problem worth considering may be:

1. modernization of flats,
2. the creation of special 24-hour units – nursing homes within the same district,
3. day care centers also within the residential environment of older adults,
4. prevention of becoming of “ghettos” of older people in deteriorated urban spaces.

The accumulation of issues of individuals aged 60 years and older in space of a city discussed above has also been proven in subsequent studies conducted by other Polish investigators (Błędowski, 2003; Szweda-Lewandowska, 2021).

In a similar way the problem has been analyzed by Canadian researchers (Després, Lord, 2005). Here the research team was studying that complex issue in widely interdisciplinary manner. The analyses included perspectives of few types of specialists like: architects, urban planning experts etc. This study was focused on senior residents of post-war suburbs of Quebec. Their life situation included living in the old decaying buildings and flats requiring repairs and renovations as well as their own individual aging and gradual losing physical fitness. As regards to solution to the problem of increasing dependency on the care of others, relocating of the above mentioned older adults to a nursing home had been considered as too expensive. Moreover, similarly to senior residents of Polish old town districts, these older adults were emotionally attached to their place to live. So after the complex analysis the research team proposed strategy to let these residents live in the habitat they got accustomed to through the years. That idea included improvements and adjustments of the residential environment which could help discussed older adults in reaching out to the places in which the services and institutions essential for their life-quality are located. The very important part of this scenario were the enhancements in transportation system so that it would be more accessible for senior residents and readable for them as regards to information how to get to given points or/and board preferred means of transport. Such proposals were the added value of the interdisciplinary cooperation of the specialists in fields like: urban planning, architecture or widely residential environment (Després, Lord, 2005). They were based on thorough SWOT analysis of the area and the multidimensional situation of its older residents.

4. Summary

Demographic aging may have both positive and negative consequences. In case of local communities it usually means a spatial concentration of olde people. As it was mentioned earlier when this concentration is concerned it may lead to the flowering of social capital of older

persons in given area or the cumulation of problems of their last stage of live. This two scenarios are of course the extreme ones. There can be potentially whole spectrum of other possibilities. In coping with potentially positive and negative consequences of demographic aging different scenarios may be considered and launched. As regards to social capital, which means effective support networks a good strategy is to create them within the community organization method. One of the types of it is that one which is done as an action research intervention in the collectivity of older people in given area. At the very early stage of such interventions older persons are gathered in one place for discussion about their needs and possible actions concerning these needs. Their preferences are searched through surveys. In the next stage actions derived from these preferences are put into practice. Then, in the end, the impact of these actions organized for senior citizens is studied or even measured by research again. In Poland there are good traditions of such participatory research regarding the needs of older generation (Czekanowski, 2000; Halicka, Pędich, 1997).

Considering the emigration of younger dwellers to other places for different reasons, which is the case e.g. in some towns of Silesian voivodship (GUS, 2025), the risk of development of “ghettos” of older people mostly in old and neglected districts of cities should be addressed. That is important practical issue for the managers of the municipalities. The solution of this problem requires launching some strategies aimed at drawing young people to rural areas, districts, housing estates and towns prone to demographic aging. Such strategies have to be connected with the creation of residential environment friendly for all groups of inhabitants according to the idea of universal design (Goldsmith, 2000; Preiser, Smith, 2011). As the combination of positive and negative characteristics in each case of residential environment is different, in each case the SWOT analysis seems to be suitable research strategy for complex diagnosis of the situation of older inhabitants.

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