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Space and Things in the Context of Old Age¹

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Abstract

The article is focused on meanings acquired by space and things in the context of ageing and old age. The author derives from the research “Seniors in Society. Strategies of Maintaining Personal Autonomy” carried out in years 2002-5. The project was originally inspired by the objective to understand the importance of autonomy in old age and processes through which the elderly try to keep their autonomy. The data from this research underwent a repeated quantitative analysis, rooted in the newly formulated research question: “*What is the role of space and things in the life of seniors as persons of a certain age, in a certain life period*”. The outcomes of the analysis are presented in the third part of the article. It follows the chapters where the attention is paid to the issue of space and things in the context of gerontosociology and the description of the methodology of the said research. The data analysis shows that space and things are significant elements of the life in old age. Seniors set them into three main frames: physical self-sufficiency, or personal autonomy and safety; integration in informal social networks; and home as a subjective centre of the neighbourhood. It is clear that space and things become a substantial part of the strategies of “coping with old age”.

Key words

space, things, gerontosociology, old age, seniors, personal autonomy, social integration

Introduction

The contemporary sociology is growingly facing the issue of *space* for both theoretical and practical causes (Strassoldo 1990); it had dealt with it as “something out of the social sphere” (Musil 2006: 1) for a long time. According to Thomas Gieryn (2000) the so-far rather *a-space* sociology becomes a science sensitive to space, place (*place-sensitive sociology*). It can be added that it becomes a discipline sensitive to *things* – the more the acceptance of their study as “an important part of our knowledge of man” (Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton 1981: 1).²

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² The course of sociology from the oldest *space sociology* via *a-space sociology* to *re-space sociology* was described in detail by Raimondo Strassoldo (1990) See also the contribution by Jiří Musil (2006) that inspired us to think over the issue of space and things in the field of sociology of ageing and old age.

The indicated trend is not very clear in gerontosociology within which we are going to deal with space and things in this paper. Nevertheless, as mainly psychological research shows, space and things play an important role in the process of individuals' adaptation to old age. The importance of their gerontological research is significantly emphasized by the current and anticipated social impacts of demographical ageing. The needs of social practice related to e.g. seniors' housing and care of them will bring up the issue of space and things in gerontosociology persistently. The definition of loneliness in old age as a "social problem" already brings forward the question of relations defined by *place*³ – neighbourhood.

The presented paper is focused namely on the significance of space and things in the context of individual ageing and old age, or meanings related to and derived from them by the elderly in their everyday life. It is based on the analysis of statements of the participants of the research *Seniors in Society. Strategies of Maintaining Individual Autonomy*, the so-called *Moravian-Silesian Study*.⁴ The methodology used corresponds with the challenge to enrich the exploration with researches based on the qualitative paradigm, articulated as a precondition of further development of space- and things-sensitive sociology (Strassoldo 1990).

First, the grounding of the issue of "space and things" in gerontosociology will be evaluated in the article. Because it is not intended as a survey paper, we do not aspire to a complex, systematic survey of literature in the given field. (A comprehensive examination of the theoretical and empirical production "per se" would be a difficult task because the issue interdigitates many sociological disciplines in various contexts.) A note on terminology, or the theoretical position of researchers and methods applied in the Moravian-Silesian Study follows further in the text of the article. Particular research findings are presented in the following, core part.

Space and things in gerontosociology

Gerontological theories focused mainly on explaining the social matter, or social consequences of ageing and old age, and there was not much "space for space and things" left in them: It concentrated on the psychological and microsocial aspects of ageing, i.e. individuals' patterns of adaptation to ageing and old age in relation to role losses (theory of *disengagement*, theory of *activity*) in the 1960s. Attention was turned to changes of social structures and their impact on ageing and seniors' social situation (see especially theory of *age stratification*, *modernization* theory, *political economy of ageing*) in the following decade. (In more detail Sýkorová 2007.)

The influence of *phenomenological* sociology entered social gerontology in the 1980s, bringing along "space- and things-favouring" interest together in everydayness in the elderly. This perspective determines the important position of individuals' experience of objects (things) in the lifeworld of everydayness; it respects the spatial(-temporal) dimension of common activities which form this perspective. E.g. Jay Gubrium found out in his outstanding phenomenological study *Living and Dying at Murray Manor* (1997) that offices, rooms, floors determine usual worlds of interaction of the clients and staff of an institution caring of seniors, possibilities and quality of their mutual communication. Thus it proved that space significantly forms individuals' *worlds of meanings of living*.

³ See Giddens 1998.

⁴ GAČR, reg. no. 403/02/1182. The author was the grant receiver.

Interpretative sociology, including phenomenological sociology as well as symbolical interactionism, ethnomethodology, social constructivism and dramaturgical sociology, directed the study of ageing and old age to meanings ascribed to social situations as well as *things* by seniors. Things together with space in the given paradigm are accentuated also from the viewpoint of their role in creating and recreating individuals' identity (Matthews 1979; Marshall 1980; Rowls, Ravdal 2002).

What cannot be omitted are theories developed at the boundary of gerontosociology and gerontopsychology. Space and things are dealt in a close connection with seniors' adaptive competence there. E.g. the theoretical model of *personality-environment fit* presents both physical and social space as a significant source of support and, on the contrary, barriers to personal autonomy. It ascribes an important role to balanced environmental requirements and individual abilities what constitutes individuals' feeling of competence and their evaluation as competent persons by the others. [Lawton 1989] Another influential model of *selective optimization with compensation* sets the adaptation of space and use of things into procedures through which ageing individuals cope with the reduction of their sources, and which thus represent strategies of "successful ageing". It means that space and things are understood as a part of the choice of activities, goals and aspirations (selection), picking of alternative means enabling functioning in the original domain of activity (compensation) and their perfection with regard to both old and new goals, or fields of activities (optimization) (Baltes, Baltes 1990; also Brandtstädter, Baltes-Götz 1990; Baltes 1996).

The number of empiric studies focused on the significance of place in seniors' life has been increasing since the 1980s. The spatial organization on various levels – from the arrangement of residential areas of settlements up to the layout of the space of one's own house or flat – is thematized as an issue of the relation of spatial and social distance, i.e. privacy, personal autonomy as well as social integration and social control (E.g. Lawton 1985; 1989; Douglas 1991; Gieryn 2000).

In research studies space occurs e.g. in relation to seniors' tendency to spend their time where they feel safe, can have a rest, have "their things at hand", from where it is possible to "observe the events" and influence social interaction according to their needs (Marshall 1980; Lawton 1989; Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton 1981). These are places providing privacy or, on the contrary, facilitate communication with the others and represent *surveillance zones* (Rowles, Ravdal 2002) or *control centres* (Lawton 1985).

The issue of *routine and habitual behaviour* in old age crystallizes in the field of study of "the bond to a place". Emphasized are the adaptive advantages of environmental mastery on the base of which individuals master both the physical and social environment (Lawton 1989; Ryff 1989; Featherman et al. 1990), perform their everyday tasks, save "energy for something else" (Berger, Luckmann 1999: 56). Familiarity and ease are rooted in individuals' everyday routine activities what also characterizes a number of life features in local contexts too according to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (ibid). Randall Collins related routine to intimate knowledge of space and the emotional bond to a place (Collins 1981), Thomas Gieryn to subjective safety in a place (Gieryn 2000) and Anthony Giddens to ontological safety more generally, i.e. individuals' trust in the stability of material (and social) environment, in reliability of things (and persons), or in durability of one's own identity (Giddens 1998).

Seniors' need to stay "at their place", in a familiar environment is considered an adaptive feature of ageing (Rowles, Ravdal 2002). The longer people live in a place and collect their bio-

graphical experience, the more they feel rooted there (Gieryn 2000).⁵ Of course, it is not only about familiarity with and emotional bond to the geographical, or physical space but about *community – common relationships* formed in the course of social interaction, on the basis of shared residence (Giddens 1998; Hendricks, Hendricks 1986). Both its sides, i.e. the relational and functional ones are significant from the gerontosociological point of view (Musil 1967). It is clear on the basis of empirical researches that community can be a significant source of social support in old age.⁶ However, it is evident from empirical researches that it is rather of the character of help in situations when the family household's power is not sufficient, as described by Jiří Musil (ibid).

The feeling of affiliation to a certain locality, neighbourhood is saturated especially by the bond to home. It is again based on *physical space* – a shelter (Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton 1981). Home expresses and overlaps a personality, is related to the values of individual safety, privacy, independence; it is a place of looking back on their lives for the elderly and in this sense it is a *personal home* (Sixsmith 1986; similarly Doyle 1992). As a place shared with one's significant others or a place of recalled sharing in the case of seniors' family of "empty nest", widowers and widows, it is a *social home* (ibid). Three mentioned meanings of home interlace and crystallize into the overall *experiential place integration* (Rowles, Ravdal 2002). Powell Lawton emphasized in relation to old age that "home is maximized autonomy" (1989: 153). As Kenneth Doyle explains (1992) an individual can but does not have to prove their competence, can have it under control as well as resign from control and e.g. express their emotions openly.

Home can also be defined by means of things situated in it. Generally, things both fulfil the *utility* or *socialization* functions (they are "tools making life easier", change life style) and bear a *symbolic meaning* (they refer to specific features of individuals' personalities, their social status, social integration) and create *identity* of their users (Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton 1981). The study by the above-quoted Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugen Rochberg-Halton (ibid) who studied "the world of things" of family generations showed that things from home and the neighbourhood were reminders of events, seniors' own successes, their relationships to the significant others. As Aafke Komter notes, things directly participate in the development of relationships in the last mentioned meaning (Komter 2001).

Changes usually accompanying old age can impede seniors' ability to stay and get old in a place. Numerous studies evidence psychological and social risks of *displacement* related to the loss of the familiar environment of a flat, house, neighbourhood and frequently also many things the elderly need that define their personalities and make their lives meaningful [Douglas 1991]. The typology of moving by Litwak and Longin, based on the review of empirical studies of this issue, indicates the influence of the character and reasons of relocation: What seems problematic is especially (1) an involuntary move to the permanent institutional care caused by a crucial reduction of physical self-sufficiency (*dependency move*). (2) A relatively less serious deterioration of health condition and the need of occasional or temporary help leads to moving near the home of one's adult children, or into their homes – for the sake of

⁵ Graham Rowles and Hege Ravdal note that the process of *ageing in a place* must be understood in its relation to the previous stages of the life course. Thus it is necessary to study space and things from the *life course perspective*. (Rowles, Ravdal 2002)

⁶ See e.g. Řeháková 2003; Kasalová 1990; Sýkorová 2007.

the support of personal independence (*independence maintenance move*). Significantly different is (3) the migration motivated by an independent decision to improve conditions of one's housing, or life in old age (*amenity migration*) (Litwak, Longino 1987).

As it has been announced, the re-analysis of the data collected in the mentioned research *Seniors in Society. Strategies of Maintaining Personal Autonomy* (Moravian-Silesian Study) also aimed at space and things in old age.

Space and things in the Moravian-Silesian Study

Note on terminology and the method applied

The assumption is that space and things are “double constructed”: People produce them; they frame their activities and influence individuals' behaviour. Although they are geographically or physically real, space and things are interpreted – perceived, felt, understood, narrated – by individuals at the same time and become a part of their identities (compare Gieryn 2000). This viewpoint corresponds to the approaches of interpretative sociology to which we avowed in the theoretical starting points of our research.

For the purpose of this study, we define *space* as an extent containing “configurations of physical objects” – things, or artefacts, natural objects and last but not least people (Hamm, Jałowicki 1990: 11). Space merges in with *place*, both the real one, i.e. a geographical point (e.g. armchair) or a room, flat, house, neighbourhood or exceptionally settlement. Terms *things – objects – items* are used as synonyms.⁷

The data files that were a part of the research *Seniors in Society. Strategies of Maintaining Personal Autonomy* include the so-called *main research* (Seniors 2002) and *qualitative study of seniors* which are relevant for the study of space and things in old age. The sample of the first one was designed on the basis of probability sampling with the elementary unit of municipalities of the Moravian-Silesian Region. Persons in each municipality were selected with regard to their sex, locality and character of housing in the municipality (Loučková 2003). There were 124 men and 193 women put in the main research; approximately one fifth consisted of persons of 60-64 years of age, one fifth of persons of 65-69 years of age, one quarter of person of 70-74 years, another fifth of respondents of 75-79 years, nearly one tenth of seniors of 80-84 years and hardly a share of 5 percents were persons over 85 years of age. In the search for participants of the second, qualitative study in the form of “snowball sampling”, regard was paid to their age, sex, level of physical self-support, family and parental status – according to the way their significance for autonomy in old age gradually got refined during the analysis. 13 senior women and 5 senior men from the city of Ostrava participated in the study: three persons in their sixties (62-years-old *Jana*, 63-years-old *Hana* and 66-years-old *Nurse*), ten in their seventies (70-years-old *Journalist* and *Stepfather* and *Asthmatic* of the same age, 71-years-old *Marathon Runner*, 72-years-old *Lady from a Tea Shop*, 73-years-old *Religious Woman*, 74-years-old *Zdeňka* and 77-years-old *Pharmacist*, *Auntie* and also *Religious Man*), two in their eighties (82-years-old *Lawyer* and 87-years-old *Grandma from the*

⁷ We treated *space – place – environment* as conceptual equivalents in the previous part of the article. As far as deeper terminological analysis is concerned, we refer to the studies by Strassoldo (1990), Gieryn (2000), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), Appadurai et al. (1986).

Hill) and three in their nineties (90-years-old *Lady from France* and 93-years-old women *Mrs D.* and *Neighbour Karin*).

The Moravian-Silesian Study aimed at answering the research question how seniors handle everyday life – how they experience old age, or what is their experience of it, and what they do to maintain their independency on other people. The character of the research question influenced the choice of the inductive methodology and the tool of data collection within it: The interview applied in the main research was structured into thematic areas regarding (1) autonomy as a need in the context of other individual needs; (2) individual and social circumstances of saturation of autonomy (material and social sources etc.) and (3) discrepancies between an individual and the environment and methods of coping with them, i.e. strategies of adaptation to potential functional losses caused by ageing, changes of environmental requirements, life normative and situational changes with regard to maintaining autonomy in old age (Sýkorová 2007). Interviewing was in the form of “an interview according to instructions” (e.g. Hendl 2005). In the qualitative study a non-structured interview was applied, derived from a generally articulated incentive: “What could you say about the issue *You as a person of a certain age, a person in a certain life period?*” and after the first issue is exhausted: “What could you say about the issue *Seniors (the elderly) in society?*”⁸

The foundations of this journal study is the data gathered from 317 semistructured interviews and 18 non-structured interviews, providing a basis for a re-analysis inspired by a new question “*what role is played by space and things in the life of seniors as people of a certain age, in a certain life period*”. The qualitative content analysis consisted in the search for categories of “space” and “things”, related subcategories, their features as well as the identification of phenomena relating to space and things, or contexts in which space and things were mentioned by seniors. E.g. *Space*: Place in the flat – flat/house (home) – neighbourhood. Current places – remembered places. Contraction of space. Interrelations of the thematization of space/distance: Coping with everyday activities – availability of the significant others – hobbies, interests – life wishes. Mobility – immobility. Etc. *Things*: Things from home – things on the move (passed on – presents, inheritance, things acquired) – things moving (during a move). Approach to things (neutral – positive/favourable emotional bond – negative/refusal). Strategies of using things: Age-related – age-neutral. Support/barrier of personal autonomy – compensation of insufficiency – ensuring safety – symbol/means of social integration, etc.⁹

As stated above, space and things were “lifted from the data” by means of the inductive methodology. Or the seniors – research participants themselves significantly determined the contents and structurization of the following part of the paper.

Meanings of space and things – outcomes of the study

Space and things turned up to be important issues for seniors; they were revealed particularly distinctly and in a clear context in the analysis of unstructured responses of the participants in the qualitative study.¹⁰

⁸ The detailed characteristics of the methodology are published in the book by Sýkorová 2007.

⁹ Contrary to the original study of personal autonomy and strategies of its maintaining in old age (Sýkorová 2007), procedures of the grounded theory were not applied here (Strauss, Corbin 1999).

¹⁰ This is why passages of the unstructured interviews are frequently inserted.

Space, things and physical self-sufficiency

Old age usually brings along the decline of power and increase of health problems. The seniors from our study presented themselves as physically self-sufficient; still they admitted troubles performing many activities. In the responses space appears in the meaning of *coping with it within “their” environment*, i.e. flat, house or municipality – mobility was heavily stressed. If it is limited, the significance of benches “on the way”, parking places; physical barriers to motion in the negative sense.

E.g. 82-years-old immobile woman describes her troubles overcoming barriers with her wheelchair: (...) *All that is not in the reach of the wheelchair, my neighbour or nurse go by car there or an ambulance is called so I don’t see a problem in transportation. It works well. Parking is a problem sometimes – and there are barriers for wheelchairs everywhere. I can help myself with crutches at the worst.*

A great number of seniors see stairs as a risk that can literally imprison them in their flats (93-years-old *Neighbour Karin* has not been leaving her flat after a hip joint injury; the seriously ill *Asthmatic* who gave up a larger first-floor flat in favour of his children cannot go out for a walk because he cannot surmount stairs up to the third floor). The “staircase problem” is confirmed by sociogerontological studies; surveys of health condition of the Czech population mention walking upstairs at the top of the rating of long-term problems in both men and women (*Výběrové* 2003).

The fundamental strategy used by the seniors to cope with everydayness was *self-help* based mainly on their *will to mobilize their own power*, including “mobilization” of things: Significant importance in this context is ascribed to an ordinary automatic washing machine, telephone for arranging services, car, motorcycle or bicycle for a case of unreliable public transport. These are things fulfilling a utility function as defined by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) but mainly *promoting independence*. Maintaining personal autonomy was more or less the objective of major reconstructions of flats, modifications of its furnishings.

It seems that it is not only immobile seniors who create “control centres” through positioning armchairs toward the windows, doors and TV sets, placing telephones, personal belongings and serving tables within arm’s reach (Lawton 1985) – as observed also at *Lady from France* or *Asthmatic*. It can be concluded from the example of *Mrs D.*, *Grandma from the Hill* or *Neighbour Karin* that similar centres are important for mobile seniors too, albeit “only” saving physical energy or contributing to relaxation. Their significance is closer to what was identified by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, i.e. the seniors see them as a place “where they most feel at home” (1981: 137).

Physical intimacy means the possibility to orientate oneself easily – the seniors know the environment “in the dark”, and frequently literally just as 77-years-old woman from the main research. However, the immediate and more distant surroundings of the house often change in towns, and uncontrollably from the individuals’ viewpoint. Thus the seniors’ “mental maps” (Bauman 2002) become considerably unreliable due to dynamic changes in the use of space, changes of the functions of an area and competing for space (Musil 1967).

(...) *I come back from Ostrava [the centre] so tired just as if I came from mountains [laughs] ... so very tired – and then, one doesn’t even know his way. Here in Ostrava, I*

knew the lanes, the shops, where everything was, and now I wanted to buy something and I didn't know where. It keeps changing, all the time, everything is different – and well, yesterday I was – it used to be – what was its name, in the good old times [laughs] ... in the good old times it was Bachner [laughs], then it was Prior and I went there yesterday and found out that there was nothing there in fact... (74-years-old divorced Zdeňka).

Distance is a significant dimension of space for seniors. They relate it to both coping with everyday tasks while most emphasizing the accessibility of shops, services and especially medical care, and to spatial attainability of the significant others, i.e. contacts with their support. It is evident in the first case how the elderly's space *narrows* in a great dependence on individual physical sources (also on financial sources in case of travelling). Space, exceeding *abroad* thanks to their travelling, gets limited to *this country*, later to short trips in the *immediate surroundings*, walks in the *neighbourhood*, then to the bench *outside the house* and to the area of the *flat* or one point in it in the form of the mentioned *armchair* or *bed* in the advanced, self-insufficient old age. The vigorous *Lady from a Tea Shop* travels around the world and “is not content with one journey a year”, *Jana* regularly goes skiing with her friends to the Alps, *Hana* sometimes goes with a discount “on the railway” to Croatia. The tired *Stepfather* participates only in shopping excursions, *Pharmacist* in “minor events” of the seniors' club. The very old *Grandma from the Hill* sits around on the bench, *Mrs D.* and *Neighbour Karin* do not leave their flats. *Asthmatic* connected to a pulmonary ventilator is dependent upon an armchair mostly, *Lady from France* upon her bed and is glad to be able to “limp to the bathroom”. Health condition clearly deteriorates in the advanced, self-insufficient old age, “performance is lacking” and the seniors “simply can't”. Then an armchair or bed represents a “minimum territory” where the boundary between the front and back regions probably fades away if Goffman's concept is applied (1999).¹¹

The understanding of distance in the sense of *availability of the close ones* reflects the importance ascribed to “being in touch” as the basis of positive relationships with their adult children by the seniors. E.g.: (...) *I say if I didn't see them a long time it would be bad for me. I have to see my son every day. I, I see him every day because I also go to the stall every day (Journalist)*. Conflicts and interruptions of contacts are experienced as extremely hard if the children *live nearby*: (...) *We're sorry for it, especially because they live literally at a stone's throw. Simply, it turned out badly. (70-years-old married man)*

Distance is a criterion determining the frequency of contacts and provision of certain types of assistance – urgent help (help in illness) or, to the contrary, help with minor tasks that are “not worth” travelling from afar. A *great distance* of their homes is regarded a legitimate reason for children not participating in contacts and support by both the generations. E.g.: (...) *I can't complain about the relationships with our children, unfortunately we see each other scarcely due to the distance. (divorced 82-years-old woman)*; a middle-aged participant about his sister: (...) *it's okay even if my sister is far from here, she hardly helps at all (our parents) ...it's fine with regard to how far my sister lives.*

¹¹ *Contraction of space* was discussed by Powell Lawton (1985) as a psychological strategy of seniors' adaptation to moving in a nursing institution.

On the contrary, living nearby, nearer than a sibling, even in the same house means stronger expectations from the part of the others and more probable takeover of help – interpreted as both as a commonplace or something that was accepted under the stress of the mentioned circumstance. Spatial closeness is an implicit characteristic of *neighbourhood*, compared to relationships with adult children.

Neighbourhood and home

Georg Simmel stated that what creates the phenomenon of neighbourhood is not the form of spatial proximity or distance but psychological “contents” (Simmel, Frisby, Featherstone 1997). The seniors’ statements indicate that the geographical availability of neighbours is important but not sufficient for both social contacts and potential instrumental help. Significant is the history and quality of bonds, generational proximity, i.e. relationships of personal intimacy among equals into what relationships connected with a place developed in the course of time (Giddens 1998: 107). Seniors frequently consider their long-time neighbours to be their friends and talk about them in positive contexts of satisfying, reciprocal exchange of support.

(...) In other aspects I feel satisfied... my neighbours are great here, we get on well... Opposite my flat there is a lady with whom we moved in together, so to speak. Well, I lived here when my children were born, they were, well, before they went to school, three, four years old... (74-years-old divorced Zdeňka)

(...) But I have a life housing here so if I can stay here a year or... or a week, or a day, I enjoy being at home... My neighbours are great. They help me a lot. (93-years-old widow Neighbour Karin)

(...) I still have a good backing here, environment, well I have a good neighbour too; well she has helped me a lot practically since my husband’s death... But Lída, she is also alone, this lady, so we help each other when I’m for example ill. Then she helps me, or sometimes there is nowhere to do my shopping and she buys me staff, and vice versa. So this is a great help. I think that it is necessary to help each other because you never know when you need something. (63-years-old widow Hana)

The participants in our study also talked about “their” *things* and *places in the neighbourhood*: benches in front of the house and in the park, a pub where men go “for a chat”, a “little confectionary” where women meet. These are pleasant places to have a sit-down, some refreshment in a space they are familiar with, cope with it routinely and that belongs also to the close people in the neighbourhood (similarly Collins 1981).

Statements of many seniors document at the same time how spatial layout and architecture of buildings can decrease opportunities for interactions. They point to the risk of social isolation related to personal reserve (Simmel), or polite inattention (Giddens) or succession – change of inhabitants of a house (Musil).¹² 71-years-old *Marathon Runner* expressed it in a typical way:

(...) Nobody ever sits down [on the “settee” in front of a twelve-storey building]. Everybody just passes by. And we don’t know those people at all. I don’t know what problems they have, what you know they have, where they are from, where they co..., where they have been to, where they work. I don’t know anything... I don’t know that. And that, I

¹² Compare Keller 2004: 334-7; Giddens 1998; Musil 1967.

miss it somehow. There's nothing to tell to someone. Well, when a man is older and when one is left then one needs to have some people around... We moved three times at Poruba. Now, the third place is the worst one, elderly people get replaced a lot, so that younger ones live there. And I, I don't know them... And if a neighbour is being... is murdered, he will call for help, then some neighbour won't even notice. Well, that's the way it is today. That's the estrangement.

Seniors perceive personal threat quite intensely, especially outside in the street. "They watch out", "are vigilant", do not leave the house in the evening or at night, avoid places where they feel vulnerable, spaces that earned a "reputation" of dangerous places.¹³ They lock their flats, "do not open to strangers".

E.g. (...) And I'm really annoyed at criminality. Thea[ves] ... just as we were talking about me not going... letting a stranger in because I don't trust, I'm worried. About the fact you don't know who would abuse the situation. We are old... I just open the window, have a look who is down there, and if nobody's there – is hiding, you know – I don't go, don't open to anyone... And there was no need to be worried once! (73-years-old married Religious woman). Similarly also 77-years-old widowed Pharmacist.

Statistics do not necessarily have to confirm victimization of seniors. If they consider necessary to change their daily routine in order "not to become victims" their fear is very real [Hendricks, Hendricks 1986]. A threat to their personal space and loss of safety can probably end up in *displacement* without even leaving the place (Gieryn 2000).

Nevertheless, neither worries about criminality nor inadequacy of the quality of housing regarding the elderly's needs are not impulses sufficiently strong for moving. This is because it is "easier to stay where it is familiar" (Collins 1981: 996), in the place connected with memories of the experienced "good and bad things", where we have acquaintances and friends, property and frequently things of sentimental value and where we are relatively independent individuals, i.e. in the environment with all these "anchors" of our identity.¹⁴

E.g. 82years-old divorced woman: (...) My daughter keeps inviting me to move to her, to Austria saying they have a large house but I don't want to, I've been living here for over sixty years, and I don't want to get accustomed to a new environment! Also 77-years-old childless widow who has a "nice outbuilding" at her nephew's does not want to leave Ostrava.

Place as a part of memories of seniors is one of the categories searched for in the analyzed texts. It seems that the older or less self-sufficient seniors are, the more frequently and probably more strongly memories are connected with their youth, early adulthood (*Grandma from the Hill, Lady from France, Asthmatic*). Then moving of seniors turns their memories to the place they had left (*Grandma from the Hill, Ms D., Lady from France*). According to Gieryn (2000), we remember and recall exactly those places to which we relate significant events of our lives.

¹³ See also Bauman 2002.

¹⁴ See Settersten 2002; Sluzki 2000; Rowles, Ravidal 2002.

The words of a self-insufficient woman who has been cared for by her daughter for several months illustrate more than tellingly that displacement in old age has unfavourable impacts on the elderly's identity and well-being. It probably applies whether they move near their children, to their children's homes or an institution. It is because the move is usually involuntary and frequently permanent:

(...) Well, there [at Krnov], I tell you, I was better mentally, psychologically – for instance neighbours, the caretaker and so on came to see me ... I don't have it [here]. And there was nature around behind the windows, the garden, and here I see roofs of the opposite houses, so... and my health state gets worse and worse... (90-years-old Lady from France).

It is during separation when the importance of *home* shows fully as a physical identity with many physical things inside and its psychological and social dimensions, as defined by Peter Ennals (2000) and Kenneth Doyle (1992): *Lady from France*, quoted above, experiences separation in reality. Other seniors have considered it hypothetically – the feeling of loss, however anticipated, was still so strong.

(...) Having my own room, my own furniture, just like here... But not coming there to... where two people live, one kitchenette, and you can't take anything of your staff there, well, no! One can't feel fine there despite there is a doctor there, everything, but that's not it! And moving an old person, that's bad if one can't even take his staff. That's right! So I have this little room of mine here, I'm happy here, there's my old furniture here, everything is the way I want it... (74-years-old divorced Zdeňka).

*(...) But there [to the retirement home] you can take a box of pictures and personal clothes. No personal things, some or a piece... maybe some picture... well, pictures you can take. But nothing. So you are in an absolutely strange environment... leaving for a different place, that would really bother me. I need the place where I grew up, or some pieces of furniture from my parents to have a notion of a part of that home, so I believe that it would definitely be better to have more those social workers who could see those lonely people or help them a little so that they could stay in their environment, they would be definitely happier there. (77-years-old widow Pharmacist). A 66-years-old woman strictly concludes: *I condemn retirement homes – it destroys the man.**

Thus seniors relate old age to the threat of gradual *expropriation* of space and things, starting with moving of *their own things from their own space* (their homes) to *someone else's space* (the flat of their adult children or a pension) and finished with moving of oneself to a *strange space* with *strange things* (retirement homes, long-term care hospitals etc.). See fig. 1.

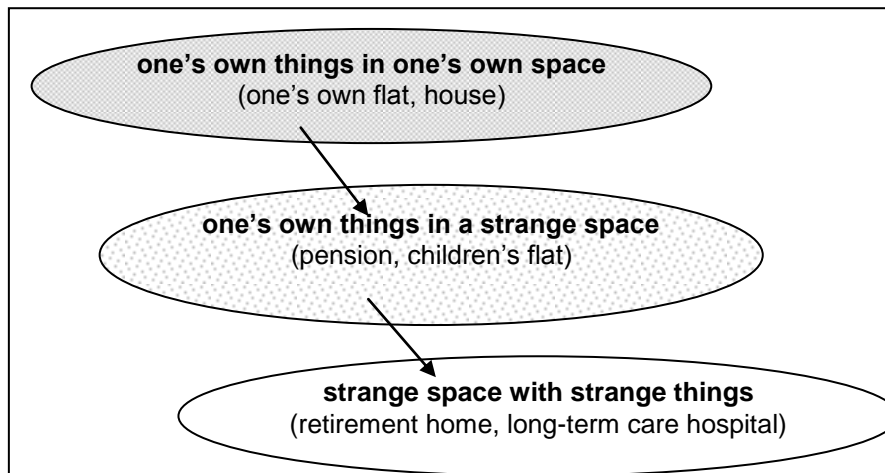


Figure 1

Things in old age

Things included in narrations of the seniors in our research were mostly just *things from home*. They were the above mentioned things “supporting self-sufficiency, or independency”, scarcely items “merely” making life more pleasant and easier. The seniors most frequently mentioned things carrying a *symbolic meaning*. Every participant in the qualitative study mentioned *pictures* of their closest ones and every one presented them during the interviews as well as pointed out received gifts, drawings and their grandchildren’s works despite the fact that they were “on display”. E.g. Ms *Zdeňka* commented with unhidden pride:

(...) Well, my granddaughters, they are my joy, the two of them... anyhow, this one, she is an amazing girl and furthermore, she made this for those glasses, she is such a gadgeteer! ... here I have her picture, she is the one in the dark clothes, the one who is in Brazil now. And the other one is, as I said, the one with Poděbradka [laughs]. Well, now they look a bit different again, this was, I believe, for her school-leaving exam, a photograph of school-leavers. ... while everything around, here in the showcases, I was given everything and it would be hard to give it up... not having it, well, I don't know, I can't imagine that...

Journalist did not conceal over her pictures that she kept them as a treasure. The lonely *Neighbour Karin* proudly displayed her pictures of a birthday party organized for her by her neighbours: “they are like her family”, “they didn’t forget her”! The widower *Stepfather* has a framed picture of his recently deceased wife hanging in the living room and an album of pictures of his holidays at hand that he spends with his grandchildren placed in his custody. These things represent above all the seniors’ personal bonds to the significant others, are symbols of *social integration* and *family generation continuity*.

What come strikingly to the foreground are things as *means* of social integration – namely *telephone*. The need of safety, security, related to themselves and mainly to their close ones by the seniors, is saturated by means of it. A typical example is the 87-years-old *Grandma from the hill*:

(...) *I call every day, every day or twice a day. I pay a lot for the phone. Until I have.* Her daughter explains: (...) *She keeps calling. She calls everyone, and if for instance somebody is not at home, Anda's not at home, kids are not at home [grandma's granddaughter and great-grandchildren], around eight or a half past eight: "so where's Anička and where are the kids and when are they going to bed and when will they make their homeworks?"*

The seniors also *presented* their *social status* – education, profession, material state – through things. *Journalist* presented her university student's record book and diploma thesis; *Mrs D.* postcards sent to her by her employer and later his son; *Stepfather* showed expensive anti-allergic duvets and a massage armchair he "could afford" to buy. Most of them also mentioned and often presented *books* and *bookcases*: Not only *Lawyer* who still endeavours to be active in his area, educates himself and keeps buying new specialist books for his large bookcase; or *Auntie* who prides herself upon the exceptionality of her fancy for political literature (her peers are certainly not interested in such literature according to her!) but also *Neighbour Karin* despite the fact that she reads only magazines and newspapers now. *Lady from France* mentioned a book on a side table which she started reading a long time ago, and briefly also the fact that she used to read original books in foreign language. Emphasizing the possession of books is probably aimed also against the still existing image of the elderly as persons incapable of serious mental activity.

It is obvious that seniors also proved the *continuity of their own competence* and question the negative stereotypes of old age. In correspondence with it, they also refuse things that are generally considered a sign of old age and that destroy their identity – definitely a *stick* or *crutches*. E.g. a 75-years-old widow confessed: (...) *I walk with a pair of crutches and am ashamed in front of the others. I have found out that my neighbours laugh at the way I walk. I troubles me a lot, makes me sad... I don't go anywhere, don't keep in touch with anyone.* On the contrary, *not having certain things* can be stigmatizing as well.

They assume an ambivalent attitude towards things "given over to" the productive age – it frequently is a *computer* as implied by *Lawyer's* antipathy to learning to work with a computer on *Auntie's* unfulfilled wish "to be able to use that computer – she is always worried to touch anything so that she doesn't delete or mess up something". (It is possible to notice underestimation of elderly parents by their adult children in certain contexts, especially their abilities to "still" learn to use technical novelties.)

The *thing television* also serves for verification of competence and confirmation of its persistence: *Auntie* finds out when watching "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?": (...) *the knowledge we gained at school once, at daily school, are still sufficient for me today.* *Zdeňka* emphasizes that she would stand the programme "You're smart". Still, they have a controversial relation to television, quite frequent in their narrations – they criticize it and "can't be without it" at the same time. E.g. *Pharmacist*: (...) *but now... one can't choose much. There are these soap operas or detective stories, and you know in advance how it will end up, right.*) They do not like watching old programmes which they have seen "perhaps a hundred times", just like *Zdeňka*: (...) *And on TV as well... it's repeated, in fact it's being repeated all the time at my age right... maybe the young ones have not seen it and so, it's not that I'm complaining, not at all, but there's nothing for me on altogether.* Thus they question the presumption of the importance of television as an *extension of age identity* (Volek 1999).

What seniors look for on television is entertainment, information – they watch “[programmes] of travel and The Objective and stuff like that (*Pharmacist* etc.), “some commentary” (*Lawyer, Journalist, Auntie* as well as *Mrs D.*); nearly all the participants of the qualitative study watch “News”. The narration of *Asthmatic* typically expresses the significance of television in old age as *a substitute social activity* as well as a *strategy of coping* with serious illness and immobility: (...) *Those elderly people, like me, are bound to be at home, not to go anywhere. I’m dependent on television and also programmes... One only wants to... have a rest.*

The participation of television in the transformation of spatial(-temporal) relations in social life is broadly accepted by the specialists. The statement that it has “colonized the domestic space” almost seems as a cliché. Our research also showed that television influences the organization of physical, or social space: Disputes over the choice of the programme are solved by many elderly spouses by watching one’s “own” programme in different rooms.

Another category of things – *things in motion*¹⁵ passed on as a *present* or *inheritance* – emerged in the qualitative analysis. It was found out that seniors emphasize *equality in exchange* with their adult children by means of presents, very frequently in the financial form. As the previous data analysis of the Moravian-Silesian Study revealed money can be an important source with which seniors enter family transactions, a means balancing contacts and help by the significant others (Sýkorová 2007). It probably strengthens their own self-esteem and respect by the others (e.g. grandparents buy their grandchildren what parents cannot afford). The said meaning of money is evident especially in the context of decreasing physical capacity – the ability to financially support their close ones was emphasized mostly by the eldest, seriously ill and immobile seniors.

The only *inherited thing* in our research was a family house. If interconnections of donation could be captured it was the strategy of passing over the responsibility for property to the next generation. (The adult children most frequently interpreted this “gift” as a commitment of help to their parents, typically expressed: “I inherited the house so I have to take care of it.”)

Allow us to conclude with a note on *acquisition of things*: Things do not become outdated for seniors as quickly and radically that they would consider necessary to change their wardrobe, buy new appliances and furniture neither. They present the fact that they do not need to purchase the said stuff as a “comparative advantage” of old age. Emotional relationship to one’s *own* old things is probably mixed with the lower needs of the elderly (objective, or socially constructed) and largely reduced financial sources. The significance of bought things is rather shifted to “what is absolutely necessary” and “what money can really cover”. The life objectives or desires of seniors do not include things but rather health, self-sufficiency, “good: of the significant others and satisfactory family relationships. If old age “means time when a person stops chasing after useless things” (Sokol 2002: 137) and thus does not accumulate new things, then it applies to most the seniors from the research.

Conclusion

Space and things appear to be significant elements of life in old age. Seniors place them in three main frameworks: 1/ physical self-sufficiency, or personal autonomy and safety; 2/ integration into informal social networks and 3/ home as a subjective centre of a neighbourhood.

¹⁵ *Things-in-motion* (Appadurai 1986).

Seniors perceive both *spatial barriers* to independence, social contacts and relationships, ensuring safety as well as realization of life objectives and *supportive features of space* enabling these values, as well as *things* by means of which they are maintained and developed. Thus the layout of space, placement of things in it and things themselves, architecture of buildings, exposure of a flat, and last but not least the use of space in the territory of the municipality, its changes and character of a place from the viewpoint of personal safety and protection of property come to the foreground in the given context.

Especially important for seniors is *spatial distance* that is a dimension of expectation and experiencing the frequency of contacts and the quality of relationships, scope and types of support and its sources, even their own hobbies. Many other researches (e.g. Možný et al. 2003; Vohralíková, Rabušic 2004; Sýkorová 2007) point out a relatively strong correlation of quantitative and qualitative features of social contacts or relationships and the geographical proximity.

The significance of proximity and other characteristics of space manifest themselves especially when seniors have to overcome it, as pointed out also by Jiří Musil (1967). Space is made even more important in situations what they *cannot* overcome it. It shows that space and things in old age are connected with seniors' state of health and the level of mobility and physical self-sufficiency depending on it. Health problems limiting their ability to move result in the "contraction of space", i.e. narrowing the geographical field of seniors' activity up to a mere spatial point (armchair, bed). Then things supporting the maintenance of self-sufficiency, mobility or compensating its loss come to the centre: things serving for physical rest outside as well as at home, facilitating work, saving energy, enabling to call for help, mediating information, distraction, both real and virtual connection to the world and the significant others.

What can be considered relevant for the determination of space and things in old age is also the *time of staying in a place*. The narrations clearly show that long-term staying is a precondition of familiarity with a place, good acquaintance with it, "rootedness" in a place, development of supportive, relational and functional side of the neighbourhood – i.e. the fact that the space of one's flat, house, neighbourhood becomes a "mastered world of certainty and safety" of subjectively competent, social anchored individuals (see also Gieryn 2000; Collins 1981).

A space or place of special significance is *home*. Seniors define it also by things – "*things from home*" formed an overwhelming majority of objects mentioned in the interviews. They appeared in the context of coping with common everyday activities, the seniors' relationships to their closest ones and endeavour at positive self-presentation. The data from our research confirm the findings by Mary Douglas (1991) that people keep "needful" things and things "meaningful" for them at home (also Settersten 2002; Sluzki 2000). The explicit physical self-sufficiency together with the specific dimension of the *utility function* of things defined by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton sticks out among the needs: *support of independence* (1981). Further is evident the need to *develop bonds* between seniors and their significant others and to keep the awareness of *generational family continuity* – the scope of things of this symbolical meaning included letters, small gifts and souvenirs from their children and grandchildren and especially pictures of living and deceased members of their families, capturing also the events experienced with them. Similar were the conclusions by not only Mihaly Csik-

szentmihalyi and Eugen Rochberg-Halton [ibid] but also Aafke Komter (2001), Alinde Moore and Dorothy Stratton (2002) and Helena Lopata-Znaniacká (2002).

A significant change of the perspective of viewing “their space and things in them” by seniors is brought by moving from their homes perceived as permanent and involuntary. Whether the seniors thought of leaving for their children’s places or moving to an institution (still mostly hypothetically) they also considered *displacement* in the context of immobility, or total dependency on help by the others – i.e. *dependency move* (see Rowles, Ravidal 2002). Contrary to Jon and Davis Hendricks (1986) and Gay Heathcote (2000) who stated that people can be forced to “a move” only by a deterioration of their state of health and financial troubles we give only one reason based on the data collected: a very bad state of health, or physical self-insufficiency.

The seniors in our research ascribe the risk of displacement, equated with the *expropriation of space and things*, to old age. It means it is equated to the loss of home and gradually also things from there, starting with furniture and ending with smaller items of symbolical meaning. (According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), leaving even such common things as a bed, fridge etc. has a negative influence on the identity of individuals.) Thus it seems that a “good or bad address” gains a different meaning in old age. A good address is where seniors get old “in their place”, a bad one “anywhere else”. Thus in the latter case it is possible to ask a question whether an elderly is *persona non locata*, similar to a homeless person?¹⁶

Things represent seniors’ *social status* – a diploma represents the level of education achieved, specialist books the profession practised once, bought expensive things the current financial situation. Referring to the above-quoted authors, it is possible to conclude that the elderly express the positive features of their personalities, e.g. cultivation, psychological and social competences. We state that things also symbolize the *age status*: Possessing or not possessing a certain thing (stick, crutch, computer), being dependent on it or, on the contrary, being able to get along without it, being or not being able to use it is interpreted as a confirmation of the negative identity of *old* woman or man by seniors.

Our study outlines the importance of donation of things for confirmation of intimate bonds and generational continuity and for achieving symmetry in exchange of support with their adult children. Aafke Komter talks first of *presents reflecting community*, then presents *reflecting equality* (Komter 2001). Our data show the handover of inheritance rather as liberation from investments related to the maintenance of property. Very insignificant was the importance of things as a *socialization agent*; unanswered remains the question of transfer of social values and attitudes “through” things, use of things in order to prove the donator’s authority in their relationships with beneficiaries or the presence of instrumentality and calculation in handing presents over [compare ibid: 69-71].

To sum up, in old age space and things become a significant part of (1) the strategies of *coping with everydayness*, i.e. both the strategy of self-help, saving energy, reconstruction of space etc. and the strategies of coping with serious illness and immobility; (2) the strategies of maintaining the past *social relationships* and developing the contemporary ones: *in space*

¹⁶ Gieryn 2000.

(meeting friend and neighbours in “their places”, exchange of support in the place) and *through things* (telephone, pictures, gifts, inheritance); and (3) the strategies of *supporting the favourable self-image* of the individuals.

Seniors negotiating the transitions of ageing endeavour to keep control over their situation in the relation to themselves and the others with regard to circumstances and available means (Marshall 1995) – let’s substitute “circumstances” and “available means” for space and things. Referring to the data gained, a hypothesis can be articulated that the mechanisms of selection, compensation and optimization are applied in negotiations and that the endeavour to at the continuity of one’s own identity stands in the background. This supports the theoretical model of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes, Baltes 1990) and the concept of continuity of Self (Atchley 1989).

The applied methods enabled to set the studied phenomena, i.e. space and things in a set of circumstances related to them, and to capture the strategies of coping or reacting to space and things with regard to how they occur in particular perceived circumstances or a given context. Still it is obvious that further, more profound study of space and things in old age. Some of the questions open to future gerontological research were stated above. Nevertheless, it is possible to emphasize the importance of spatial and things-determined relations of ageing and old age and to state that gerontology cannot ignore space and things without depriving itself and, after all, also the possible practical applications of the result of its research.

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