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The distance to death perceptions of older adults explain why they age in place: A theoretical examination



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ABSTRACT

Older persons prefer to age in place or stay put in their current dwellings and move less frequently than any other age group. However, current residential mobility theories do not fully account for these preferences and behaviors because they focus on why older people move rather than on why they remain in their dwellings and do not consider the temporal or human developmental context of these residential decisions. It is essential to understand why older persons are reluctant to move because their ability to age successfully—have healthy, independent, active, and enjoyable lives—depends on where they live. When they stay put, they also rely more on family caregivers and paid home care providers to maintain their independence, rather than on the supportive services offered by senior group facilities, such as assisted living. They demand more home modification and financial service products, and their residential decisions influence the supply of housing that younger populations can potentially buy or rent. This paper's theoretical analysis proposes that Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (SST), a lifespan theory of motivation, improves our understanding of why older persons age in place—either in their dwellings or more broadly in their communities. It offers an alternative interpretation of how life-changing events, such as retirement, lower incomes, spousal death, physical limitations, and health declines, influence their residential decisions. Whereas residential mobility theories view these transitions as disruptions that change the appropriateness or congruence of where older people live, SST proposes that older persons perceive these events as signs or cues that they are closer to death and must differently prioritize their goals and emotional experiences. Feeling their time is “running out,” older persons are motivated to stay put because moving requires preparations that are physically and emotionally trying and they are able to adapt to their current housing shortcomings. Their residential environments are now also a source of difficult-to-replace positive emotions and provide them with a supportive network of intimate and reliable interpersonal relationships. It is challenging for them to learn how to safely and efficiently conduct their usual activities and routines in another location and to establish new residential attachments and social connections. They would benefit from any net positive emotional payoffs only in a distant future, an unattractive prospect when they perceive a limited time left to live. Empirical studies must test the theoretical propositions presented in this paper. However, the disproportionately large projected future growth of the age 75 and older population with a heightened awareness of their limited time left to live should be a strong rationale for such investigations.

Introduction

Older persons prefer to age in place or stay put in their current dwellings and move less frequently than any other age group (Binette & Vasold, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019; Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2012). However, theories by demographers, gerontologists, and environmental gerontologists only imperfectly explain these preferences and behaviors. They primarily focus on why older people move rather than on why they remain in their current dwellings and do not consider the temporal or human developmental context of these residential decisions (Golant, 2003; Perry, Andersen, & Kaplan, 2014;

Roy, Dubé, Després, Freitas, & Légaré, 2018; Wiles et al., 2012). The theoretical analysis presented in this paper proposes that Carstensen's (2006), socioemotional selectivity theory (SST), a lifespan theory of motivation, improves our understanding of why older persons age in place (Alley, Liebig, Pynoos, Banerjee, & Choi, 2007; Greenfield, 2012). SST argues that the distance to death perceptions of older persons influence how they prioritize their goals and emotional experiences. Its constructs and relationships help to explain why older persons resist moving from their dwellings and more broadly from their communities even as they experience disruptive life events—retirement, widowhood, poor health, and physical limitations—that the experts believe make

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their residential environments incompatible with their lifestyles or efforts to remain independent (Alley et al., 2007; Greenfield, 2012).

It is essential to understand the motives underlying the aging in place decisions of older persons because a substantial literature argues that where they live influences their ability to age successfully, that is, to have healthy, independent, active, and enjoyable lives (Golant, 2015a). Just as importantly, when frail older persons age in place, they are more likely to rely on assistance from family caregivers and paid homecare providers to maintain their independence, instead of the supportive services offered by senior group housing facilities, such as assisted living (Golant, 2004). Moreover, because older people are disproportionately homeowners, when they stay put, they demand more home modification/maintenance services and financial products and services (e.g., mortgage refinancing and property tax deferrals). Their residential decisions also influence the supply and condition of housing available to younger populations who seek homeownership buying opportunities (Chan & Ellen, 2017; Golant, 2008a; Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2018; Oswald, Schilling, Wahl, & Gang, 2002).

Explaining aging in place behaviors: past theoretical approaches

Two theoretical approaches frame research investigating whether older people move or age in place in their current residences (Koss & Ekerdt, 2017). Gerontologists and migration demographers rely on the first and most used approach, which proposes that a set of individual and environmental changes motivate residential moves. Two conceptual models dominate: Wiseman's push-pull "triggering mechanisms" and Litwak and Longino's developmental perspective model (Perry et al., 2014).

Wiseman's (1980) model theorizes that older persons move when they are less satisfied with their current residential environments. Triggering "push" events motivating their moves include retirement, difficulties performing everyday activities, health declines, spousal loss, income losses, and unfavorable housing circumstances (e.g., repair and upkeep demands and unsafe neighborhoods). "Pull" motivations occur when there are more attractive dwellings, neighborhoods, or communities to move—because of their physical, social, economic, or care features.

The developmental perspective model of Litwak and Longino (1987) proposes that three types of age-related life events motivate older people to move. The first move results when older persons retire, and they seek destinations to enjoy recreation and leisure opportunities or to live closer to their friends or grandchildren. The second move results from the onset of chronic disabilities and mild cognitive impairments. When older persons have difficulty performing everyday activities such as shopping, managing money, cooking, and cleaning, they move closer to family members or service providers who can assist. Lastly, the third potential move is in response to more severe cognitive and health declines when older persons cannot easily perform activities such as getting dressed, eating, walking, toileting, bathing, and medication management. They then transition to nursing homes to obtain appropriate assistance.

Environmental psychologists rely on a second approach. They interpret moving behaviors as proactive motivational responses by older persons striving to occupy residential environments with better regulated or more congruent person-environment outcomes (Oswald et al., 2002). The residential environment in these treatments typically refers to the physical (natural, built, material, financial, technological) and social "phenomena, events and forces" (Chaudhury & Oswald, 2019, p. 3) outside developing individuals that denote their dwellings, neighborhoods, and communities. The congruence or the quality of their residential environments is based on the objective assessments of experts or professionals or the subjective appraisals of older persons, as measured by their perceptions, cognitions, and emotional experiences (Golant, 2015a).

Environmental psychologists specifically focus on how the belonging-related and agency-related motivations of older persons influence their likelihood of experiencing optimum person-environment outcomes (Koss & Ekerdt, 2017; Wahl & Lang, 2004; Wahl & Oswald, 2016). Processes of belonging encompass the non-goal-oriented emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social bonds or attachments formed by older people with their everyday environments that help account for their unwillingness to separate from their familiar dwellings and cherished possessions.

Agency processes refer to the goal-directed behaviors of older people acting as proactive change agents, whereby they adapt their residential environments (such as by moving elsewhere or making home modifications) to fit declines in their physical and cognitive abilities (Chaudhury & Oswald, 2019; Wahl, Iwarsson, & Oswald, 2012; Wahl & Oswald, 2016). The lifespan theory of control (Heckhausen, 1997) and the model of the aging self (Brandtstadter & Greve, 1994) argue that these primary control behaviors or assimilative coping strategies are adaptive throughout the life span when older persons must cope with stressful events or situations in their efforts to gain control over their environmental transactions. Thus, when an older woman suffers a debilitating stroke and is unable to live independently in her current dwelling, she is motivated to regain control over her life and environment by taking actions—and she moves into an adult daughter's home (Golant, 2015b). Lawton and Nahemow's (1973) Competence-Press model offered an early rationale for these agency processes. It argued that the less competent older occupants of adverse environments are more vulnerable to their threatening aspects and must proactively respond to maintain their independence (Golant, 2011; Wahl et al., 2012).

My residential normalcy theory offered another interpretation of person-environment fit and focused on the emotion-based residential experiences of older persons (Golant, 2011). It theorized that older persons achieve residential normalcy (or person-environment congruence) when they experience two overall positive sets of emotions. The first is when they are in their residential comfort zones and have pleasurable, memorable, and hassle-free emotional experiences. The second is when they are in their residential mastery zones and feel competent and in control of their residential environments. When they feel out of their comfort or mastery zones, they initiate assimilative (action) or accommodative (cognitive) (Heckhausen, 1997) coping strategies to regain these positive emotional experiences. The theory interpreted moving as the most extreme assimilative coping option to achieve residential normalcy—and the occupancy of a more congruent residential environment.

Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST)

As older persons advance into higher chronological ages, SST argues that they become aware—whether consciously or subconsciously—of their inevitable mortality or the finitude of their lives (Charles & Carstensen, 2009). These distance to death perceptions influence their motivations (e.g., striving for meaningful goals), cognitions (e.g., memories, attention), and emotions (e.g., feelings) (Carstensen, 2006). Specifically, when aging adults have more constrained as opposed to more expansive time horizons, they are less likely to select and pursue knowledge-based goals with payoffs or outcomes only realized in the long-term or more distant future. Pursuing these goals is emotionally trying because they must learn new information, acquire new experiences, and investigate future opportunities (Carstensen, 2006; Giasson, Liao, & Carstensen, 2019). Rather than setting goals that require these future preparations, older persons who perceive death as near prioritize goals that result in positive, higher quality, meaningful, and gratifying emotional experiences in the here and now. At the same time, they try to avoid negative emotional experiences and strive to achieve a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions (referred to as the "positivity effect") (Carstensen, 2006, p. 1915). They are particularly motivated to

engage in social relationships with a smaller and more salient group of familiar significant others with whom they enjoy emotionally gratifying, enriching, and predictable outcomes (Lockenhoff & Carstensen, 2004). As Carstensen (1992, p. 331) expresses it, “contact with strangers or acquaintances comes to cost more than its worth.”

The rationale for SST as an explanation for older adults' aging in place behaviors

There is an overarching theoretical rationale for expecting that the distance to death perceptions of older persons will motivate their aging in place decisions. Aging persons contemplating the finitude of their lives do not select and pursue their goals in an environmental vacuum (Giasson et al., 2019; Golant, 1984). That is, human development occurs not only over time but also in diverse and changing residential environments. These physical and social contexts offer their aging occupants the opportunities, incentives, and rewards for achieving their goals, but also present them with obstacles, deterrents, and costs (Wahl & Lang, 2004; Wahl & Oswald, 2016). Additionally, these contexts have their own histories, pasts, and trajectories of change (Rowles, 2017). Consequently, aging individuals interact with residential environments not only as current occupants but also through remembered experiences and future expectations (Golant, 2003).

Arguing that the distance to death perceptions of older persons influence their residential decisions has profoundly important implications for interpreting their life-changing events. Both the earlier reviewed Wiseman's push-pull model and the Litwak and Longino's developmental perspective model and a large body of related empirical research (Lindquist et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2018) conceptualize older persons as motivated to move because of disruptive life events or undesirable housing changes that result in discordant environmental outcomes (Diehl & Wahl, 2010; Golant, 2015b; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973).

The postulates of SST, however, imply a very different interpretation. Rather than older persons viewing their life events as disruptions that motivate them to move from their incongruent residential environments, they perceive these life-changing transitions as reminders or cues of their limited time left to live (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). However, this mortality awareness does not motivate them to move but instead to age in place. It is a catalyst for motivational, cognitive, and emotional processes that result in older persons appraising their current residential settings as more or less congruent with their goals and needs (Carstensen, 2006). Consequently, when older persons deliberate on their aging in place and moving choices, they must weigh the salience of two contradictory sets of motivating factors and decide between very different residential futures.

Although this paper is arguably the first to fully articulate the theoretical relationships between aging in place and SST, it is certainly not the first to recognize their importance. Environmental psychologists have longtime proposed that when older persons perceive death as near, their social belongingness-related motivations become more important than their agency-related motivations and account for why they are so emotionally attached to their familiar homes and neighborhoods (Geboy, Moore, & Smith, 2012; Scharlach & Moore, 2016; Wahl & Lang, 2004). They further argue that these social belongingness motivations explain “why old, and particularly very old, adults are hesitant to undertake repeated relocations” (Wahl et al., 2012, p. 4). By the same theoretical logic, as older persons become aware of their limited time left, they prioritize the salience of their positive residential comfort experiences and are less motivated to move (Golant, 2011).

The influence of SST on older people's aging in place dwelling decisions

Based on the constructs and relationships explicated in SST, the following four propositional relationships argue that when older

persons perceive their deaths as near, they are more motivated to age in place or stay put in their current dwellings.

1. Moving to a new residential environment requires information acquisition, learning, and physical adaptations. Older persons must transition from familiar to unfamiliar environments and attempt to re-establish longstanding and dependable activities and routines. These actions are financially costly, time-consuming, emotionally stressful and even when successful can result in net positive emotional payoffs only over the long-term. Consequently, when older persons perceive a limited time left to live, they are more likely to age in place than to undertake the preparations required to adapt to a new residential environment.

SST focuses on the temporal context in which older persons select and pursue their goals (Liao & Carstensen, 2018). When older persons perceive their deaths as near, they prioritize goals that result in emotionally satisfying and meaningful experiences in the present (Scheibe & Carstensen, 2010). Because of their shorter time horizons, they eschew goals that require demanding preparatory activities, such as information gathering, knowledge-seeking, and physical adaptations that yield emotional payoffs only in some “nebulous” future (Lockenhoff & Carstensen, 2004, p. 1396).

The preparatory activities associated with moving are typically unremarkable, but potentially stressful and unpleasant, requiring “large amounts of physical and psychological labor” (Sergeant, Ekerdt, & Chapin, 2010, p. 1031) and upfront financial expenses. Older persons must initially identify potential residential options, scrutinize their pros and cons, and make a final selection. To sell their dwellings, they must find a real estate broker, lawyer, and pay real estate transaction costs. They must prepare their dwellings for viewings, acknowledge shortcomings for selling purposes, find and pay handymen to make physical repairs, and tolerate strangers (from vendors to potential buyers) in their homes. They also must divest themselves of many physical possessions, secure and pay for a moving company, and endure the typical moving day stresses (Ekerdt, 2020). Renters experience an easier exit because they mainly must advertise their units, end their renter's lease, and secure movers.

Older persons must contemplate the severing of their longstanding and predictable ties with shops, restaurants, clubs, religious organizations, and healthcare providers (Wiles et al., 2012). The need to “disrupt customary modes of behavior” (Lieberman, 1991, p. 127) is physically and emotionally trying (Löfqvist et al., 2013). They must leave a familiar environment where they had routines or “behavior circuits” to accomplish their everyday activities (Perin, 1970, p. 78). These “allow (ed) for increased efficiency, decreased decision-making, and the conservation of energy” (Rowles, Oswald, & Hunter, 2004, p. 172).

Moving requires older persons to establish a new domicile (e.g., new mail address, utilities, cable, property tax exemptions), replace their vendors, service/health care providers, and organizations, explore new amenities, and learn anew how to efficiently and safely conduct their usual activities and routines. These actions are often time-consuming, stressful, and have uncertain outcomes (Löfqvist et al., 2013; Lord, Després, & Ramadier, 2011; Wiles et al., 2012).

Because of these moving preparations, it may take months or even years for older persons to adapt successfully to the demands (“environmental press”) of a new place of residence (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). Consequently, even if they believe that moving will improve the quality of their lives, they must anticipate net positive outcomes (i.e., a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions) only in a distant future, an unattractive prospect when they perceive death as near (Carstensen, Gross, & Fung, 1998).

Environmental psychologists have argued that some groups of older persons will find moving to be especially physically and emotionally demanding. Lawton's (1999, p. 94) proactivity hypothesis offered an early explanation: “the higher the competence of the person, the better

able the person would be to utilize the resources of any environment in the service of personal needs.” Conversely, less competent older persons with diminished capacities who perceive death as near would be especially likely to interpret the “proactive” preparatory activities associated with moving as physically and mentally hard work (Leibing, Guberman, & Wiles, 2016). For these aging persons, “ageing in place becomes a necessity – rather than a choice” (Barken, 2019, p. 4).

I early offered an economic interpretation of why distance to death perceptions influence older persons’ moving behaviors. I argued that residential moves often require a large upfront “fixed cost” investment of money, time, and energy that older persons believe are overwhelming expenditures when they perceive a limited time left to live. That is, “the fixed costs of realizing any increased residential benefits have to be borne over a short period of time. As a consequence, the ratio of benefits to costs declines as the distance to death becomes shorter” (Golant, 1984, p. 212).

2. Relocating to a new residential environment requires older persons to sever their current emotionally salient and physically reliable social relationships. It will take months or even years (if ever) to replace these longstanding bonds. Consequently, when older persons perceive a limited time left to live, they are more likely to age in place to maintain their positive and predictable social experiences.

SST argues that as older adults chronologically age, they have smaller social networks of family, friends, and neighbors (Charles & Carstensen, 2009; Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm, 2008). It interprets this contraction as successful adaptations by older persons aware of their limited time left. By reducing the number of their social partners, they focus on their most salient and reliable interpersonal relationships with those who are the most physically and emotionally supportive. These persons accept them for who they are and contribute to their feelings of self-efficacy and control (Antonucci, Ajrouch, Webster, & Zahodne, 2019; Carstensen, 1992; Charles & Carstensen, 2009).

Wahl and Lang (2004) similarly argue that as older persons perceive their future time as more limited, they feel a greater sense of social belongingness (Diehl & Wahl, 2010). They feel like insiders rather than outsiders in their neighborhoods and communities, can better regulate their social interactions, and avoid conflicts and miscommunications.

Studies show that older persons with a supportive social network of interpersonal relationships are more satisfied with their current residential environments and are less likely to move. Moreover, these positive social experiences can offset their dissatisfaction with their physical environments (Beyer, Kamin, & Lang, 2017; Buffel et al., 2011; Oh, 2003; Pinquart & Burmedi, 2003; Roy et al., 2018; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Sergeant & Ekerdt, 2008; Van Dijk, Cramm, Van Exel, & Nieboer, 2015; Wiles et al., 2012). Older people especially value these social relationships when health conditions limit their out-of-home activities (Buffel et al., 2011; Oswald, Jopp, Rott, & Wahl, 2011; Zheng, Chen, & Yang, 2019). Their family members are often instrumental in helping them to maintain their independent living arrangements.

When older persons move to a new residential destination, they must sever their current social ties, an especially unattractive prospect when they perceive a limited time left to live. It would be physically and emotionally challenging for them to establish a comparable network of interpersonal connections in a new place. The salient attributes of their current social relationships—trust, acceptance, intimacy, and emotional closeness (Lang, 2000)—cannot be easily replaced (Cornwell et al., 2008; Friedman et al., 2016). Even if it were possible to re-establish these social bonds, regaining their current sense of belongingness would take a great deal of time and effort, and they would risk feeling isolated and lonely in the short term (Giuliani, 2003).

Having a viable network of interpersonal relationships in a new destination is also crucial for older persons because their social experiences influence their self-concepts, that is, how they perceive

themselves as individuals (Hormuth, 1990). Relocation may be destabilizing because their concept of themselves “no longer receives automatic reinforcements” (Cumming & Cumming, 1963, p. 48). Any new social contacts would know little about their history and their idiosyncratic likes and dislikes. Consequently, older persons must re-establish their credentials, rationalize their lifestyles, and show that they have had successful, productive, meaningful, and valuable lives—a time-consuming process. Moreover, this re-education process forces them to re-examine their accomplishments and the value of their lives—and risk their own self-doubts.

In contrast, older persons aging in place immediately enjoy a network of persons who provide pleasurable social experiences and instrumental supports and reinforce their positive self-concepts. They do not feel the need to impress or demonstrate that they are good friends and reliable community members. Avoiding such sources of anxiety is especially valued when they perceive a limited time left to live (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Golant, 2015a). One study reported on a sample of older participants who had moved in later life but then returned to their original communities to re-establish their earlier social connections (Boyle, Wiles, & Kearnes, 2015).

3. Older persons are emotionally attached to their familiar physical environments. Establishing comparable emotional bonds in another residential location would take months or even years. Consequently, when older persons perceive a limited time left to live, they are more likely to age in place and occupy physical settings where they can prioritize their current positive emotional experiences.

SST argues that when older persons perceive their deaths as near, they are motivated to prioritize present-focused goals and to enjoy emotionally meaningful and gratifying social activities and experiences in the here and now. SST predominantly focuses on social networks and relationships, but how older persons interact with their physical environments is also a source of positive emotional experiences (Wahl & Lang, 2004). SST, however, is somewhat vague as to how broadly it conceptualizes the environments of older people, although it makes passing references to their “social and physical worlds” (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999, p. 166) and their relationships with doctors, hospitals, cars, and consumer products (Reed & Carstensen, 2012).

The interpretations of environmental psychologists are less equivocal. They argue that the propositions and relationships of SST are relevant for understanding the behaviors, cognitions, and emotional experiences of older people in their physical environments. As Wahl and Oswald (2016, p. 632) express it, “processes of socio-emotional selectivity can be seen not only at the level of social partners, but also in relation to the physical environment, expressed in increasingly stronger feelings of bonding to the home environment and familiar areas.” Moreover, these cognitive-emotional-behavioral ties strengthen over time as older persons become older and perceive death as near.

Supporting these interpretations is research that has consistently found that older people have strong emotional attachments to their current dwellings, which they imbue with personal meanings (Giuliani, 2003; Oswald et al., 2011; Rowles, 2017; Wiles et al., 2012). These emotional connections motivate older people to reminisce about their lives (Coleman & Wiles, 2020; Rowles et al., 2004), to feel a sense of continuity with their pasts, and to remember their accomplishments and successes (Ekerdt, 2020; Fornara, Lai, Bonaiuto, & Pazzaglia, 2019; Rowles et al., 2004; Scannell & Gifford, 2010; Weisman, 2001). Older persons particularly construe their possessions as “treasured archeological evidence of their pasts” (Golant, 2015a, p. 49).

A longer length of dwelling occupancy often positively correlates with these dwelling attachments (Hjälml, 2014). Studies also find that these emotional attachments increase in significance and intensity as older people limit their outside-the-home activities—which also occurs at higher ages when older persons are more aware of their limited time left (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Fornara et al., 2019).

It would take many years for older persons to re-establish these emotional attachments in a new location, an undesirable prospect when they perceive their deaths as near (Diehl & Willis, 2003; Hjälm, 2014; Oswald et al., 2006; Oswald et al., 2011; Rowles, 2017; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). A common lament is, “I am too old for that” (Löfqvist et al., 2013, p. 5).

4. Chronologically aging older persons report higher levels of residential satisfaction. They attend to and selectively remember more positive residential activities, events, and relationships, adapt their dwellings to fit individual needs, and employ cognitive strategies (e.g., lower their aspirations) to rationalize their housing problems. Through these actions older persons realize immediate rewards and achieve a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions. Consequently, when older persons perceive a limited time left to live, they are more likely to age in place to preserve this positivity effect.

When older persons perceive death as near, SST proposes that they attempt to regulate—consciously or subconsciously—their emotional well-being. Labeled the “positivity effect,” they strive to increase the ratio of their positive to negative emotions. They seek out and attend to more favorable and gratifying information, material, events, and activities and minimize their negative encounters (Scheibe & Carstensen, 2010). As they become aware of their limited time left, they align their ideal goals to fit their current environmental realities so as “to be more content with their current status” (Charles, 2010, p. 1072). The model of strength and vulnerability integration (SAVI) offers a complementary interpretation of this positivity effect (Charles, 2010). It argues that as perceived time left decreases, the amount of time lived simultaneously increases. It posits that “time lived provides additional advantages to many older adults” (Charles, 2010, p. 1072). For example, these individuals have more self-knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, have more experience and practice navigating their lives, are more aware of possible pitfalls, and thus are better able to regulate their emotions and appraise situations more positively.

Studies report that older persons selectively remember the more positive, meaningful, and emotionally satisfying aspects of their residences (Golant, 1984; Pinguart & Burmedi, 2003; Reed & Carstensen, 2012; Rubinstein, 1998). That is, “they have past environmental and life experiences that they can vicariously activate and concretely and abstractly interpret to (positively) shape their current subjective environmental experiences” (Golant, 2003, p. 640). Many of their positive remembrances are of past social experiences and interpersonal relationships—such as memorabilia collected from a trip with friends or family (Hormuth, 1990), where their children played, how they spent their time with their spouses, or neighbor interactions. A qualitative study offers a vivid illustration. An 83-year-old woman was asked how she felt about the abandoned and boarded-up houses across the street. In her words:

“I have news for you. I don't see those houses across the street. In my mind's eye those are the houses that I've seen for 40 years, and that's the way I look at them. I remember the people that used to live there” (Rubinstein, 1998, p. 27).

Over their long lives, older persons have coped with hardship and adversity and have learned how to adapt their housing environments to fit individual needs. Like their social network adaptations, they selectively attend to fewer and more positive physical aspects of their residential environments. For example, they accomplish their everyday activities by going to fewer and more essential destinations and mainly to their dependable vendors and providers (Beyer et al., 2017; Fornara et al., 2019; James, 2008; Lord et al., 2011; Perez, Fernandez, Rivera, & Abuin, 2001). They also may initiate home modifications and obtain assistance from informal (e.g., family) or formal (paid help) care providers to compensate for declines in their health and physical abilities

(Freedman & Agree, 2008; Pynoos, Steinman, & Nguyen, 2010). Such coping responses enable older persons to realize immediate or short-term rewards—more reliable destinations to acquire their goods or services, safer houses, and a more protective environment (Golant, 1984; Golant, 2015b; Hjälm, 2014).

Older persons also engage in proactive cognitive or accommodative activities (Heckhausen, 1997). Consequently, they overlook or deemphasize their dwelling or neighborhood shortcomings even as their physical limitations make them more vulnerable to environmental hazards (e.g., fall risks). By denying or minimizing the negative aspects of where they live, they can continue to assess themselves as resourceful persons capable of living independently (Vasara, 2015). These favorable evaluations and expressions of residential satisfaction persist even if the experts judge their dwellings unsafe and uncomfortable because of observed physical design and care deficits (Chan & Ellen, 2017; Golant, 2008a; Pinguart & Burmedi, 2003).

Distance to death perceptions and the geographic contexts of aging in place

The aging in place construct often refers to older persons who stay put in their same dwellings (dwelling aging in place). However, researchers sometimes argue that it should more broadly encompass those who move from their dwellings but who stay put in their same communities (community aging in place) (Greenfield, Black, Buffel, & Yeh, 2019). This modified interpretation raises the possibility that the theories of Wiseman and Litwak-Longino, on the one hand, and SST on the other, can synchronously explain the residential behaviors of older persons (Chaudhury & Oswald, 2019). That is, older persons move from their current dwellings because they experience disruptive life events and incongruent residential environments; however, because of their near to death perceptions, they cope by making residential transitions that are geographically restricted (within the same communities). Below we consider if the previous four propositional relationships can explain these simultaneous moving and aging in place behaviors.

Proposition 1 argues that older persons who perceive death as near are less likely to make dwelling moves that require emotionally stressful, financially costly, energy- and time-consuming preparatory activities and adaptation behaviors that result in only long-term positive outcomes. These moves require older persons to sever their familiar and reliable ties with stores, services, and organizations and initiate new activities and routines. However, community-based moves occur within geographic contexts that older persons have extensive information and knowledge about and thus arguably require less demanding preparations and activities. In particular, older persons are less likely to experience the emotional downsides and physical inconvenience of separating from their familiar vendors, providers, and organizations. They are more likely to benefit immediately from these residential transitions.

1. Consequently, even as older persons perceive death as near, they are motivated to move from their dwellings in response to disruptive life events or discordant environments, but consistent with SST, they relocate or age in place within their familiar and easy-to-navigate communities where they experience more immediate and net positive emotional payoffs.

Proposition 2 argues that older persons who perceive death as near are less likely to move from their dwellings because they must give up their social networks of emotionally salient, physically reliable, supportive, and intimate interpersonal relationships. However, community-based moves are less likely to substantially increase the distances separating older people from their networks of significant others, and thus they still can feel a sense of social belongingness.

2. Consequently, even as older persons perceive death as near, they are

motivated to move from their dwellings in response to disruptive life events or discordant environments, but consistent with SST, they relocate or age in place within their familiar communities where they can still maintain their positive social experiences.

Proposition 3 argues that older persons who perceive death as near are less likely to move because of their strong emotional attachments to their dwellings and possessions. By making community-based residential transitions, they still can remain emotionally connected with their proximate geographic contexts. Arguably, however, preserving their strong community attachments cannot compensate for their lost and more salient dwelling or neighborhood bonds (Wiles et al., 2012).

3. Consequently, when older persons perceive death as near, consistent with SST, they are (still) motivated to age in place in their dwellings despite their disruptive life events or discordant environments, because they cannot replicate their current positive emotional experiences in another location, however proximate it is to their current dwellings.

Proposition 4 argues that older persons who perceive death as near are less likely to move from their dwellings because of their greater residential satisfaction and higher ratio of positive to negative feelings (the positivity effect). They selectively focus on the more favorable aspects of where they live, adapt their dwellings to their unmet needs, and overlook their residential shortcomings. When they make more geographically restricted moves, older persons still experience net positive feelings about their communities. Arguably, however, because they must vacate their current dwellings, they lose a significant source of the positivity effect that they cannot replace even if they remain in their same communities.

4. Consequently, when older persons perceive death as near, consistent with SST, they are (still) motivated to age in place in their dwellings despite experiencing disruptive life events or discordant environments, because their currently felt positivity effect would not survive their moves to another location, however proximate it is to their current dwellings.

The re-examination of the previous four propositional relationships offers a more nuanced interpretation of how SST influences the aging in place decisions of older persons. Proposition one and two argue that despite the influences of SST, older persons may still be motivated to move from their dwellings in response to disruptive life events or discordant environments. However, because of the influences of SST, they are motivated to make these residential transitions within the same community. On the other hand, propositions three and four argue that even when older persons experience disruptive life events, the influences of SST are the most salient with the result that older persons are still motivated to age in place in their current dwellings (Chaudhury & Oswald, 2019).

Discussion

The theories that demographers and gerontologists most rely on to explain the moving behaviors of older persons focus on the motivating influences of their age-related life events, including retirement, difficulties performing everyday activities, health declines, spousal loss, and income losses. They also propose as catalysts for moving the unfavorable conditions or attributes of their dwellings, neighborhoods, or communities. These formulations argue that older persons cope with these disruptive events and new environmental realities by relocating to places that they appraise as more congruent with their goals and needs (Diehl & Wahl, 2010; Golant, 2015b; Wahl & Oswald, 2016).

These longstanding migration theories remain as valuable explanatory frameworks of older people's moving decisions. However,

there are three reasons why these theories incompletely explain why older persons predominantly age in place (Granbom et al., 2014; Munnell, Walters, Belbase, & Hou, 2020). These shortcomings are the rationale for proposing the constructs and relationships of SST as a new explanation for the aging in place preferences and behaviors of older adults.

First, these earlier theories interpret the onset of new life events as disruptions that change the appropriateness or congruence of where older persons live. Certainly, a large literature unquestionably confirms that these major life transitions help explain the residential decisions of older persons (Roy et al., 2018). However, it also true that older persons often stay put despite these motivating influences. The constructs and relationships of SST offer another perspective. Instead of narrowly interpreting these life events as influences that disrupt their lifestyles or threaten their ability to remain independent, older persons perceive them as signs or cues that they are near to death and must differently prioritize their goals and emotional experiences (Carstensen et al., 2003). Feeling their time is "running out" (Carstensen et al., 1999, p.167), they strive to occupy and interact with physical and social environments where they can experience positive, meaningful, and predictable emotions in the present; and they eschew goals requiring physically and emotionally demanding preparatory activities that result in favorable outcomes only in a distant future (Carstensen et al., 2003). Consequently, they are motivated to stay put in their physically and emotionally familiar, easy-to-negotiate, more protective, and predictable residential environments (Lindquist et al., 2016) and particularly to maintain their current network of salient interpersonal relationships. Unlike the experts, they do not necessarily feel that they occupy housing situations out of sync with their lifestyles or competence.

Second, the theories of Wiseman and Litwak-Longino selectively focus on why older people are motivated to move, not whether they are motivated to age in place. The emphasis is on the "pressures" of developmental events (Litwak & Longino, 1987, p. 268) or on "triggering mechanisms" as motives for moving (Wiseman, 1980, p. 151). In contrast, this paper's theoretical translation of SST focuses on why older persons are motivated to stay put or age in place in their current residential settings. To be sure, the Wiseman and Litwak-Longino models point to weak or nonexistent "pull" or "push" factors that make moving unattractive, and by inference, aging in place more attractive. However, this theoretical focus results in an incomplete set of aging in place determinants. The explanatory factors underlying the moving decisions of older persons are not necessarily inversely correlated with those underlying their aging in place decisions. That is, weak or absent "push" or "pull" factors do not adequately explain why older people decide to age in place. Rather, it is necessary to propose a distinctive set of aging in place antecedents, which is the basis for this paper's four propositional relationships derived from SST. An example from a very different psychological inquiry helps to clarify. Researchers long ago recognized that the factors making people unhappy (Bradburn Affect Scale) are not merely the converse of the factors making people happy. It is necessary to conceptualize two sets of independent antecedents, one associated with negative affect and the other associated with positive affect (Harding, 1982). Neither our current theoretical models nor our related empirical investigations carefully distinguish between these independent sets of influences.

To be fair, the past migration theories were formulated before aging in place was recognized as a researchable residential decision. However, ideally, Wiseman would have conceptualized not just push-and-pull factors, but rather push-and-pull-and-remain factors (Wiseman, 1980, p. 146). Similarly, Litwak and Longino could have distinguished "not moving" as a category to account for why their three life events would not always predict the residential transitions of older people. For example, older persons today often can delay their "third move" to a nursing home if they have family caregiving assistance or professional home care.

Third, SST with its human life span focus, emphasizes the importance of the temporal context in which older persons pursue their personal goals. The current migration models do not consider how the personal time horizons of older persons influence their residential decisions. This paper offered four reasons (propositional relationships) why older persons are motivated to age in place rather than to move when they become aware of their limited time left to live: (1) moving requires preparations that take time and energy, disrupt customary activities, offers uncertain outcomes and the prospects of positive emotional payoffs only in a distant future; (2) moving severs their current emotionally salient and physically reliable social relationships and re-establishing a comparable supportive social network in another residential location would take time and at least in the short-run risk feelings of loneliness, of not belonging, and threats to their self-worth; (3) moving severs their emotional attachments with familiar physical environments—especially with their dwellings and possessions—and these bonds would be difficult to replicate in a new location; and (4) aging adults feel overall positive about where they live (the positivity effect) and they selectively attend to and remember more favorable activities, events, and relationships, adapt their current housing situations to fit changing individual needs, and overlook the shortcomings of their residences.

The moving explanations offered by environmental psychologists are more consistent with the theoretical influences of SST. [Wahl and Lang \(2004\)](#) propose that older persons age in place because they are motivated by social belonging-related processes and feel emotionally attached to their everyday environments. I similarly proposed that older persons stay put because they have overall positive residential comfort and residential mastery experiences that contribute to their feelings of residential normalcy ([Golant, 2015b](#)).

Despite the compelling arguments for why distance to death perceptions increase the likelihood of older people aging in place, it is important not to overstate SST as a theoretical explanation. The onset of major life events and residential environment changes can result in substantial individual-environment mismatches. Individual outcomes such as feeling lonely, not belonging, fearful, uncomfortable, incompetent, out of control and helpless; and environmental outcomes such as perceived dwelling physical barriers, unaffordability, stressful home upkeep issues, inaccessible stores, and inadequate long-term care may demand strenuous coping actions like moving. Under these circumstances, aging in place motivating influences will become less salient ([Golant, 2015b](#); [Lindquist et al., 2016](#); [Roy et al., 2018](#)). Older persons will move if they believe they can immediately achieve a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions and greater environmental control in a new location ([Charles, 2010](#)).

Researchers also do not have to make either-or decisions when deciding on the appropriate theoretical framework to guide their empirical investigations. As argued in this paper, both SST and the theories of Wiseman and Litwak-Longino, can at the same time, explain how older persons make their residential decisions. Their disruptive life events primarily explain their dwelling relocations, but their distance to death perceptions explain the restricted geographic (community) context of their moves.

The need for multiple explanations for why older persons age in place is highlighted by SST's failure to consider how contextual or environmental factors influence how older persons select and pursue their goals ([Stafford, 2009](#)). Environmental psychologists have constructed the Context Dynamics in Aging (CODA) conceptual framework. It outlines a comprehensive taxonomy of the diverse and historically changing physical and social contexts (both the perceived and the objective) that are occupied and interacted with by a diverse population of aging adults over their lifespans and shape their developmental outcomes, including their health and well-being ([Wahl & Gerstorf, 2018](#)). Much earlier, of course, Wiseman's migration model distinguished a wide range of environmental barriers and incentives that could influence the moving behaviors of older persons. For example, older persons will

have difficulty relocating to better quality residential environments when they cannot find affordable and appropriately designed housing or care options ([Golant, 2008b](#)).

Other studies emphasize that these contextual influences not only constrain but also motivate the moves of older persons. For example, older persons may relocate to or near the homes of family members in another state (e.g., their adult daughters or sons) who function as their inner circle of emotionally close interpersonal relationships ([Antonucci, Ajrouch, & Birditt, 2014](#)). They also will be attracted by active adult communities catering to their leisure pursuits ([Golant, 2015a](#)). Still others will be motivated by their past environmental behaviors. They move to destinations where they already have strong emotional attachments because of their earlier vacations in these locales. Here they may also have a close-knit social network of familiar friends and neighbors ([Wong & Waite, 2016](#)). Consequently, the moves by these older persons may “increase the likelihood of positive gratifying encounters and minimize negative ones” ([Scheibe & Carstensen, 2010](#), p. 138).

The ability of older persons to age in place often depends on other contextual influences, such as their ability to access information, goods, and services in their communities that enable them to maintain their independence. However, the availability of such resources often changes over time. Compared with earlier generations of older people, today's older baby boomers can more easily avail themselves of home-delivered personal care and assistance. The growth of e-commerce businesses, telehealth, and social media (e.g., facetime, zoom, virtual reality), also makes it possible for them to have immediate access to information, activities, goods, and health care delivered into their own homes and to have in situ social relationships that minimize feelings of loneliness and social isolation ([Golant, 2017a](#); [Golant, 2017b](#)). Consequently, SST will likely better explain the aging in place behaviors of older people in some historical periods than in others.

Period effects must be considered for another reason. A central tenet of SST is that as persons become older, they have a heightened awareness of the time remaining until death ([Carstensen, 2006](#)). However, SST does not consider the possibility that historical changes in how society perceives and responds to their aging populations will at least partly influence how its members view their lives, their self-worth, and what goals and emotional experiences they pursue. For example, when members of an older cohort live during a period of history when positive views of aging are dominant, and they expect to age more successfully with fewer age-related losses ([Scheidt, Humpherys, & Yorgason, 1999](#)), they may have a more expansive distance to death time horizon. Alternatively, when older persons live during a pandemic like COVID-19 when they are more at risk of dying and are treated as marginalized citizens, they may feel more vulnerable and perceive a more limited time left to live ([Miller, 2020](#)).

SST is also silent about how individual differences, as indicated by physical fitness, socioeconomic, cultural, or personality attributes, influence goal selection and emotional outcomes ([Golant, 1982](#)). Not all older persons will interpret moving as hard work—physically and emotionally stressful—with only long-term returns. Good health, wealth and high incomes arguably make residential transitions easier and the rewards more immediate. On the other hand, wealthier older persons may be reluctant to pursue residential transitions for a very different reason—they want their family members to inherit their homes after they die ([Munnell et al., 2020](#)). At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, low-income older persons, especially racial and ethnic minorities, are more likely to confront difficult-to-overcome financial and legal barriers to moving and may feel stuck in place. Individual personalities also matter. Older persons who are adventurous, extroverted, and open to new experiences are more likely to pursue residential moves ([Golant, 1984](#); [Kahana & Kahana, 1983](#); [Koenig & Cunningham, 2001](#); [Wiseman, 1980](#)). Their near to death perceptions motivate them to fulfill their bucket list of unrealized emotional experiences, which they can only satisfy by moving to a different locale

(Chu, Grünh, & Holland, 2018).

SST also makes the unrealistic assumption that older persons function as autonomous decision-makers. However, when older persons pursue their residential goals, they are often influenced by the counsel of others (e.g., family members, close friends, or trusted medical personnel) (O'Keefe, 2016). When they are very vulnerable, they must reluctantly delegate to others—influencers, such as family or professionals—"proxy control" of their residential transition decisions, and these persons will have very different goals and priorities than the older persons themselves (Morgan & Brazda, 2013, p. 77).

Despite these qualifications, SST offers another useful explanation for why older persons age in place. Its theoretical constructs and relationships particularly draw attention to why residential decisions in late life can be so painfully complicated and stressful. As older persons reach higher chronological ages, the onset of major life events motivates them to move to alternative residential or care settings with physical and social environments more congruent with their changing goals and needs. However, at the same time, they have a heightened awareness of their limited time left to live, which results in a host of reasons motivating them to stay put. Consequently, older persons must weigh the merits of two diametrically opposite sets of motives and decide between two very different residential futures.

We will require empirical research to determine the extent that the four propositions offered in this paper influence these aging in place decisions and how older persons resolve their conflicting moving incentives and disincentives. These inquiries will be especially worthwhile because of the demographic agequake that will face countries like the United States over the next 30 years (Golant, 2017b). This period will witness the disproportionately large growth of the age 75 and older population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2018). Persons at these higher chronological ages will have heightened perceptions of their limited time left and theoretically will be more motivated to stay put in their long-occupied dwellings, or at the very least, in their long-occupied communities.

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