

Preface

The field of environmental gerontology seems to play different roles in gerontology over time, oscillating between prominent contributions versus operating more in the backyard of aging research. Environmental gerontology as the research stream within social and behavioral aging research that addresses and analyzes the physical-spatial context of aging was much on the agenda of gerontology in the 1970s and 1980s. The landmark work of M. Powell Lawton (among others such as Francis Carp, Eva Kahana, Graham Rowles, and Rick Scheidt; see Wahl (2001) for an overview) at the theory as well as empirical level likely contributed much to this prominence. In the 1990s, environmental gerontology lost some of its impact and concentrated much on the demented older adults as a group with particular environmental vulnerability and a strong need for optimized environments, particularly long-term care contexts (Cohen and Weisman 1991). Since the beginning of the new century, fresh impetus has enabled reinstalling the importance of environmental gerontology, the least coming from Europe with empirical work such as the cross-country ENABLE-AGE study (Iwarsson et al. 2007). Indeed, the overall ambition to bring the area forward seems to regain power and dynamics in more recent time (Wahl et al. 2004; Wahl and Oswald 2010; Wahl et al. 2012). However, the emphasis to consider and apply environmental gerontology theory and studies continued mostly to remain a European and North American endeavor. Thus, generalization to other countries and cultures remained limited.

That said, it is excellent to see that the scope, differentiation, and application of environmental gerontology finds major extension in this new volume edited by Diego Sánchez-González and Vicente Rodríguez-Rodríguez. Compiling in a rich way perspectives on how environments shape aging trajectories and outcomes in countries such as Mexico, Chile, Ecuador, and Brazil with views from European countries, but also the USA, Canada, and Israel, is very informative as well as highly innovative and leads to both unexpected new insights and important future research impact.

In particular, I consider it as very helpful and synergy-provoking that this book is based on a broad understanding of environmental gerontology and that a range of relevant person-environment issues is treated. The book, for instance, addresses the

impact of globalization at large, “aging in place” challenges in a number of countries including the major themes of place attachment and place identity, mobility and migration, housing, and the rural-urban distinction which separates the aging worlds around the globe on a continuing basis. Future key public health challenges such as climate change or the need to develop age-friendly urban environments also find considerable attention in the book. Such a multi-theme and multidimensional approach to environmental gerontology research is also important, because it leads to the treatment of the micro-, meso-, and macro-level of person-environment transactions in similar intensity. This is both a valuable addition to previous environmental gerontology research as well as helps to profoundly anchor person-environment issues in current and future policy agendas. For example, as we see rapidly increasing older migrant populations with pronounced cultural diversity, the glasshouse effect will hit old and very old individuals to a large extent, and the designing of urban habitats in the future will be strongly affected by the full heterogeneity of large numbers of old and very old adults, ranging from those with remaining solid competencies to those with pronounced physical and cognitive limitations. Going further, the book also gives equal emphasis to the role of the objective and experiential part of person-environment transactions as people age in different countries.

A closer look at some of the chapters enables to easily corroborate what has been said in the previous section: For example, Chap. 2 gives an overview of the applicability of theoretical models established in environmental gerontology comparing South European and Latin American countries. Chapter 5 builds string bridges among person-environmental issues and health in the UK. Chapter 9 sheds light on the role of urban aging by relying on intensive case studies conducted in the city of Valparaíso, Chile. Chapter 11 highlights issues of place attachment with data from Mexico, but with an author team that gathers scholars from Mexico and the UK. Chapter 15 elaborates on the challenges and problems of what is frequently called age-friendly environments (WHO), while contrasting Manchester, Ghent, and Brussels.

In conclusion, I expect that this volume will significantly contribute to our knowledge of a range of issues related to the fact that we all age in context, though this context is strongly framed within specific cultures. Thus, the context of aging has meanwhile gained a global dimension, and therefore, environmental gerontology has to turn out international and cross-country comparative. Simultaneously, the enduring importance of environmental gerontology will receive major impulses from this volume and hence will further strengthen the area at large. Even if the oscillation of environmental gerontology continues as described above, we should do everything that it remains a priority on the agenda of future gerontology. This book will help a lot to achieve this goal.

Department of Psychological Ageing Research
Institute of Psychology, Heidelberg University
Heidelberg, Germany

Hans-Werner Wahl

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Environmental Gerontology in Europe and Latin America

Policies and Perspectives on Environment and Aging

Sánchez-González, D.; Rodríguez-Rodríguez, V. (Eds.)

2016, XXIII, 306 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-21418-4