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RURAL EXPERIENCES OF AGEING IN PLACE IN OOLTGENSPLAAT, THE NETHERLANDS.

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Abstract

Ageing in place is recognized by policy makers as an important aspect of the transition to a participation society. Older people are expected to live at home as long as possible instead of living in expensive institutionalized care facilities.

This research is structured around personal and environment changes in the lives of older adults in Ooltgensplaat, how these changes are experienced, which measures are taken to improve person-environment fit and how this enables ageing in place. The objective is to gain in-depth insights in how older adults ensure an equilibrium between their abilities and environmental characteristics, because this is lacking from contemporary literature.

The central question of this research is: *How do people aged 70 years and older deal with changes in their personal life or living environment to ensure a strong person-environment fit, which facilitates ageing in place in the rural village of Ooltgensplaat on the former island of Goeree-Overflakkee, the Netherlands?*

Seven in-depth interviews were conducted among older adults with diverse backgrounds. Findings show that older adults think ageing in place is best possible in a rural community where one is embedded in and where social capital is available. Social control is the most important enabler for ageing in place in this case study, because it increases flexibility during personal or environment changes.

Future research should focus on inter-generational differences between older adults. Younger generations seem less embedded in the social control system and this could change the way people experience ageing in place in the future.

1. Introduction

Recent demographic developments show an increasing proportion of older people in most countries worldwide, including in the Netherlands (CBS, 2022a; Schwanen et al., 2012). In the Netherlands, costs of social welfare increased because of the ageing community and this resulted in the transition of the healthcare system to a participation society in the past decades, with increasing individual responsibility for personal wellbeing. In the United Kingdom a similar transition away from the welfare state is referred to as “Big government” to “Big society” (Uitermark, 2015). At the same time older adults in the Netherlands are increasingly high educated, financially independent and want to control their own lives (Smits, 2013).

Ageing in place is seen by policy makers as an important aspect of the transition to a participation society, older people are expected to live at home as long as possible instead of living in expensive institutionalized care facilities. The concept is described by multiple authors as goal that could be reached when older people have a strong person-environment fit, a sense of security and familiarity in both the material and social aspects in the neighbourhood or village (Thissen & Droogleever Fortuijn, 2021; Wiles et al., 2012).

Wiles et al. (2012) mention that most residents who are ageing in place, experience the feeling of being insiders in their community and often value their independence highly. It is however important to recognize heterogeneity among older people when considering age friendly communities. Some only feel independent when living at home mostly unassisted, while others still feel independent when relying on assistance from relatives and even others appreciate the structure and organisation of living in retirement residences.

Thissen and Droogleever Fortuijn (2021) highlight the socio-economic differences in ageing in place. It can be more challenging for older adults with a lower income and/or a migration background than for locally born individuals with a higher income to achieve a strong person-environment fit. Therefore a person’s socio-economic or migration background could limit their ability to age in place. This concern about unequal abilities to age in place in rural areas is shared by Vermeij and Mollenhorst (2008) as well, adding that especially frail older people who have limited social contacts may need to relocate to a nursing home sooner than others who have better access to social capital in their village.

Furthermore the proportion of older adults living in rural areas is expected to increase compared to its urban counterpart because young people are moving away to urban areas for study or work (CBS, 2022a). According to Moor et. al. (2022), liveability and person-environment fit are most likely to be challenged for frail older adults in small remote villages with a declining population and reducing facilities such as shops, social activities, church, medical assistance and public transport.

One village that faces these typical challenges of rural areas in the Netherlands is Ooltgensplaat (figure 1) on the former Island of Goeree-Overflakkee. The former island is one of the regions in the Netherlands where the proportion of people older than 70 years is above the national average (1% higher) and the proportion of younger people between 20 and 40 years below the national average (between 1,6% and 2,7% lower) (CBS, 2022b). Also the average yearly income per person per year in Ooltgensplaat in 2019 was €26.400 (CBS, 2019), significantly below the national average of €34.000 in 2020 (CBS, 2021), which according to Thissen and Droogleever Fortuijn (2021) could challenge the person-environment fit.



Figure 1. Place of case study

Furthermore facilities like shops and social activities declined in the village (Kegge, 2022), which according to Moor et. al. (2022) could challenge the person-environment fit for vulnerable older adults. Gieling et al. (2019) argue that the decline of various facilities in Dutch villages can primarily be attributed to the influences of economies of scale and increased mobility, Vermeij and Mollenhorst (2008) recognize this development in many villages in the Netherlands.

In order to understand the context of this research, an assessment of the region of study is necessary. Goeree-Overflakkee is a former island that was connected to the main in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Before the connection to the mainland the island was isolated from the rest of the country and socio-economically disadvantaged with very limited, mostly agricultural employment opportunities. Also the region experienced serious floods during the second world war and in 1953, which further hindered economic development in a time of economic boom in other parts of the Netherlands. Because of this isolation from the rest of the country, the encapsulated autonomous community developed a strong local identity, based around the reformed protestant church. The completion of the bridges to the mainland improved commuting opportunities for locals, who did not have to move for employment anymore and also attracted newcomers to move to the former island. The increased connectedness to the nearby urban region of Rotterdam changed the living environment rapidly both economically and culturally. Eventually the increased connectedness also lead to a declining influence of the protestant church on the local community (Kegge, 2022). Local residents who have experienced these changes are now aged 70 years and older, and have currently transitioned from the third age to the fourth age. In gerontology the third age is described as the period in life after retirement when a person is still physically and mentally able, while in the fourth age, one is becoming increasingly less independent and more vulnerable in terms of cognitive abilities and social connectedness (Vermeij, 2016). Therefore the age group of 70 years and older needs most care and attention and thus it is the main focus group of this research.

Considering that, for policy makers, ageing in place is an important aspect of the transition to a participation society (Thissen & Droogleever Fortuijn, 2021; Wiles et al., 2012), research on how older people anticipate or act upon living environment and personal changes can reveal important insights on how this enables or hinders them to age in place and how society could support older adults in this. Since rural areas have higher proportions of older adults than urban areas (CBS, 2022a), ageing in place could become more challenging especially for frail older adults with limited access to social capital in rural communities (Vermeij & Mollenhorst, 2008). Recent literature is lacking a clear analysis of personal experiences of ageing in place of older adults in rural regions in the Netherlands. Existing research on ageing in place in rural context in the Netherlands is limited and most relevant studies are based on

quantitative or mixed method research designs, related to residential satisfaction (Moor et al., 2022; Thissen & Droogleever Fortuijn, 2021; Vermeij & Mollenhorst, 2008) or engagement in the community (Ubels et al., 2020; Vermeij, 2016).

Therefore the aim of this research is to expand the existing knowledge on the lived experiences of ageing in place in rural parts of the Netherlands. Policy makers can use these insights when constructing ageing strategies in rural communities. This study analyses how older adults deal with personal and living environment changes, how this affects their person-environment fit and how this might change their ability to age in place. The research question of this research is as follows:

How do adults aged 70 years and older deal with changes in their personal life or living environment to ensure a strong person-environment fit, which facilitates ageing in place in the rural village of Ooltgensplaat on the former island of Goeree-Overflakkee, the Netherlands?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Ageing in place

The concept of place should be perceived as an ever changing process rather than a static concept according to Massey (1994). The changing characteristics of rural places and older adults make ageing in place an ambiguous concept according to Peace et al. (2011, p. 735):

“It is a complex process, not merely about attachment to a particular home but where the older person is continually reintegrating with places and renegotiating meanings and identity in the face of dynamic landscapes of social, political, cultural, and personal change.”

This changing dynamic of the residential environment and the residents themselves is compared with a ‘coat’ that fits specific groups of people at different stages in their life by Thissen and Droogleever Fortuijn (2021). These environment and personal changes affect the person-environment fit and this could enable or hinder ageing in place. Ageing in place is for this reason not always the ‘coat’ that fits best for everybody.

The conceptual model in figure 2 guides this research by examining personal and environment changes in the lives of respondents, how these changes were experienced and which measures these older adults took to improve their degree of person environment fit in the local community and ultimately how this enables them to age in place or why they are not ageing in place.

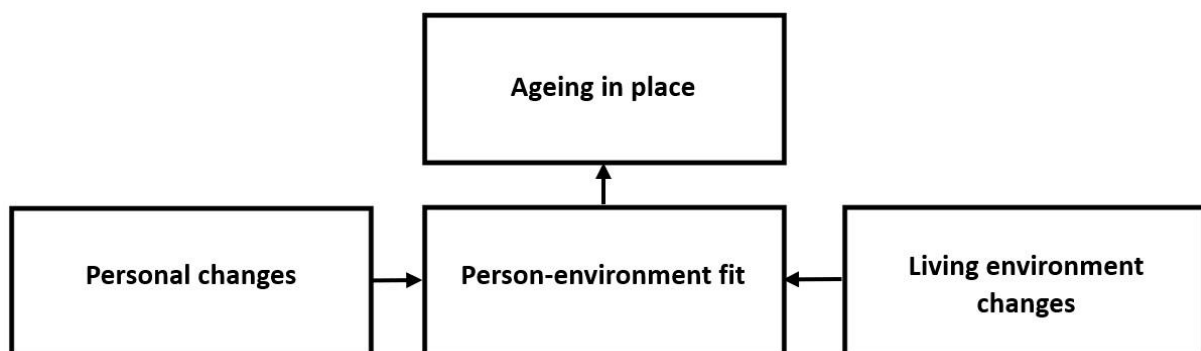


Figure 2. Conceptual model

2.2. Person-environment fit

Person-environment fit, as defined by Iwarsson (2005), refers to the extent to which the daily functioning of older adults is either facilitated or constrained by their environment. A strong person-environment fit offers a sense of security and familiarity in both the material and social aspects in the neighbourhood or village (Wiles et al., 2012). Both personal as well as environment factors are combined in order to assess the degree of person-environment fit. Therefore person-environment fit is not a static concept but dynamically changing according to personal and environment changes. Without a strong person environment fit it can be less desirable to age in place and therefore an older adult’s background and/or changing living environment could limit his or her ability to age in place. On the other hand a strong person-environment fit could benefit older adults in their ageing in place process (Thissen & Droogleever Fortuijn, 2021).

2.3. Personal changes

Recognizing heterogeneity among older people when analysing personal experiences of ageing is essential. Most people older than 70 years have transitioned from the third age to the fourth age and these people become increasingly more vulnerable in terms of health, cognitive abilities and social connectedness, which affects their independency (Vermeij, 2016). Some older adults value their independence highly and want to live at home mostly unassisted as long as possible, while others still feel independent when relying on assistance from relatives and even others appreciate the structure and organisation of living in retirement residences (Wiles et al., 2012).

A concern about unequal abilities to age in place is raised by Vermeij and Mollenhorst (2008), stating that especially frail older residents with limited social contacts in rural areas may need to relocate to an institutionalised care facility sooner than older adults who have better access to social capital in their village. Thissen and Droogleever Fortuijn (2021) add to this that older adults with a lower income could also experience a disadvantaged position because they have less resources to move to a house that suits their needs, making them more dependent on government support when their health declines. The same is concluded about older adults with a migrant background.

How people deal with change in their personal life events that reduce health, mobility, independency, social capital and economic position is affecting their person-environment fit and therefore personal changes is one of the key concepts in this research.

2.4. Environment changes

According to Moor et. al. (2022), person-environment fit is most likely to be challenged for older adults in small remote villages with a declining population and reducing facilities such as shops, social activities, church and medical assistance. Also the changing role of villages from an autonomous isolated community with a strong identity and social capital to a more residential function for locals and newcomers can have a significant impact on the lives of older adults (Kegge, 2022; Vermeij & Mollenhorst, 2008). According to Lager (2013) it is important for older adults to maintain their sense of belonging in a changing neighbourhood or village by staying involved in society, otherwise they could be at risk of exclusion.

Just like personal changes, the changing dynamics of society in rural villages between locals and newcomers, the ageing community and declining local facilities are affecting the person-environment fit of older adults and environment changes should therefore be considered as one of the key concepts in this research as well.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research focused on the personal experiences and interpretations of older adults in a rural village in the Netherlands by taking a qualitative approach based on Clifford et al. (2016), Hennink et al. (2020) and Punch (2014), which gave an in-depth understanding of developments and processes involved in the ageing process of adults aged over 70 years.

Conceptualising social behaviour, while also maintaining the participants' point of view is often best achieved through a case study strategy according to Punch (2014). That is why this strategy was used to gain in-depth knowledge in the village of Ooltgensplaat. According to Punch (2014) it is important to acknowledge concerns about the validity of a case study because of its limited scope. Data from a mostly descriptive case study cannot be generalised and transferred to other cases. While the unitary character of the case was preserved and analysed, the social data was also structured according to the conceptual model of this research to enhance the integration with existing research on ageing in place in a rural context.

Furthermore a clear description of the case and background are imperative for transferability to other cases of ageing in place in a rural regions. Many older adults in the village of Ooltgensplaat grew up in a time when the island of Goeree-Overflakkee was not connected to the mainland and the region had a strong local identity and culture (Kegge, 2022). Therefore an ethnographic approach was used in this case study, taking into consideration the way that older adults in the village define, interpret and give meaning to changes in their personal lives and environment and how they behave in response to these definitions. The purpose was to access this insider view and these meanings. Understanding this view by using an interpretive paradigm, was stimulated by the researcher's personal connection with the village, however the familiar setting was considered anthropologically strange during the analysis of data in this case study (Clifford et al., 2016; Punch, 2014).

3.2. Recruiting

Accessing the research setting was also advantaged by the researcher's local contacts in the village, this benefitted the efficiency of a deliberate convenience sample, using the snowball effect of interviewee's referring to other potential participants. The willingness to participate was overwhelming and when selecting participants, the heterogeneity of older adults in the village was considered, using a deliberate maximum variation sample to ensure capturing valuable data. This included older adults of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds, those who grew up in the village, those who moved there later in life, religious and non-religious. The aim of the sample was however saturation on the topic and not representativeness (Punch, 2014)

Intentions of the research were clearly discussed during the recruitment process, emphasising that the lack of research in rural villages would make the participants' contribution valuable, made the participants feel proud and helped to establish rapport. The relation of the researcher to the village also helped to establish trust in the intentions of the research, by the assumption that an insider would not want to harm the community. Furthermore it comforted the locally born participants who value local kinship and created a more naturalistic research setting, encouraging them to share their experiences.

3.3. Data collection

The data collection strategy that suited the research question best was a semi structured in-depth interview, because it is a powerful strategy to access perceptions and definitions from participants on the meanings of changes in their personal lives and environment and how they construct their reality of ageing in place (Punch, 2014). The purpose was to understand older adult's personal experience, therefore it was important to let the participants do the talking in a setting as naturalistic as possible. In order to make the older adults feel at ease, enabling them to openly share their story, an informal setting was created with a face to face verbal interchange in Dutch in the participant's own living room (Hennink et al., 2020).

Preparation of the interview included a carefully structured interview guide (appendix 5) with topics based on the theoretical framework of this research to ensure operationalization of the data. Also interview structure and questions were studied intensively so that the conversation between participant and researcher could continue organically in a semi-structured way. Even though the researcher had no previous experience with in-depth interviews, communication skills acquired from commercial employment proved to be very useful during the data collection process.

Furthermore it was important to minimize harm by guaranteeing anonymity and privacy to all participants in this research since the case study concerns a relatively small community of approximately 2700 inhabitants. Also the intentions and applications of the research were clearly discussed before the interview got started and an informed consent was signed before data collection started. Data was collected by recording the interview with a smart phone that was be placed on the table to avoid disturbance of the naturalistic setting. Subsequently data was anonymized and stored both on a password protected laptop and on an external hard drive.

Moreover it is important to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher in the research setting. To enhance the validity of this research the researcher operationalized the local insider knowledge into generalisable and transferable data that can be used to compare against other rural cases in the Netherlands or beyond. Also the researcher ensured to keep professional distance from participants by always taking an active and professional role in guiding the interview based on the theoretical framework of the research. There was no discussion or advice from the researcher during the interviews, only objective remarks asking a participant to elaborate on a topic if needed.

4. Results

4.1 Analysis

Scheduled time for one interview was approximately one hour, but because of the semi-structured approach the actual time ranged between 25 and 57 minutes. Table 1 shows the most important participant characteristics, appendix 3 shows additional characteristics. In total eight participants took part in seven interviews, all living in the village of Ooltgensplaat. Participant seven and eight are husband and wife, and were interviewed simultaneously. Participant two was personally related to the researcher and all other were previously unknown. This personal relationship between researcher and participant did not affect the quality of the data negatively, on the contrary it stimulated the participant to share his experience more openly. Please note that the village of Ooltgensplaat is referred to as “*de Plaat*” in quotes from locals, who identify themselves as “*Platenaar*”. People originally from the mainland are referred to as “*Overkanters*”.

	Age	Gender	Former occupation	Years in the village	Birth place
Participant 1	84	Male	Camping supervisor, preacher, civil servant marriages	54	Rozenburg (Rotterdam)
Participant 2	81	Male	Factory worker, agricultural labour	73	Ooltgensplaat
Participant 3	85	Female	Restaurant owner, voluntary work at nursing home	81	Ooltgensplaat
Participant 4	94	Male	Farmer	94	Ooltgensplaat
Participant 5	75	Male	Civil servant at social services department municipality	73	Ooltgensplaat
Participant 6	88	Female	Shop owner	87	Ooltgensplaat
Participant 7	80	Female	Housewife, voluntary work at nursing home	23	Rotterdam
Participant 8	83	Male	Zoo-keeper	23	Rotterdam

Table 1. Participant characteristics

The results of the seven in-depth interviews are congruently structured on the conceptual model in figure 2 and the objective is to gain contemporary insights in how older adults in a rural village deal with changes in their lives to ensure an equilibrium between their abilities and environmental characteristics. This is realised by analysing the positive and negative experiences of the participants in the three main themes. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed according to thematic coding, following prespecified key concepts that are founded in existing literature on the ageing in place: personal changes, environment changes and person-environment fit.

These three key concepts are used in a thematic analysis to operationalize findings on aging in place. In order to operationalize these three key themes, deductive codes were used on a lower level of abstraction (see figure 3). Also a round of open coding was used for inductive coding, which led to the codes: “Feeling out of place”, “Future perspective” and “Declining influence church and religion”. Within the codes comparisons were made between positive and negative experiences, which were compared between the different interviews. Patterns between the codes and themes were identified by using descriptive codes about the demographics and backgrounds of participants (Punch, 2014). Please find how codes are applied in the code book (appendix 1). Furthermore memos were used by the researcher during the coding process to assist the operationalization of the concepts and comparison between the different participants and avoid loss of context.

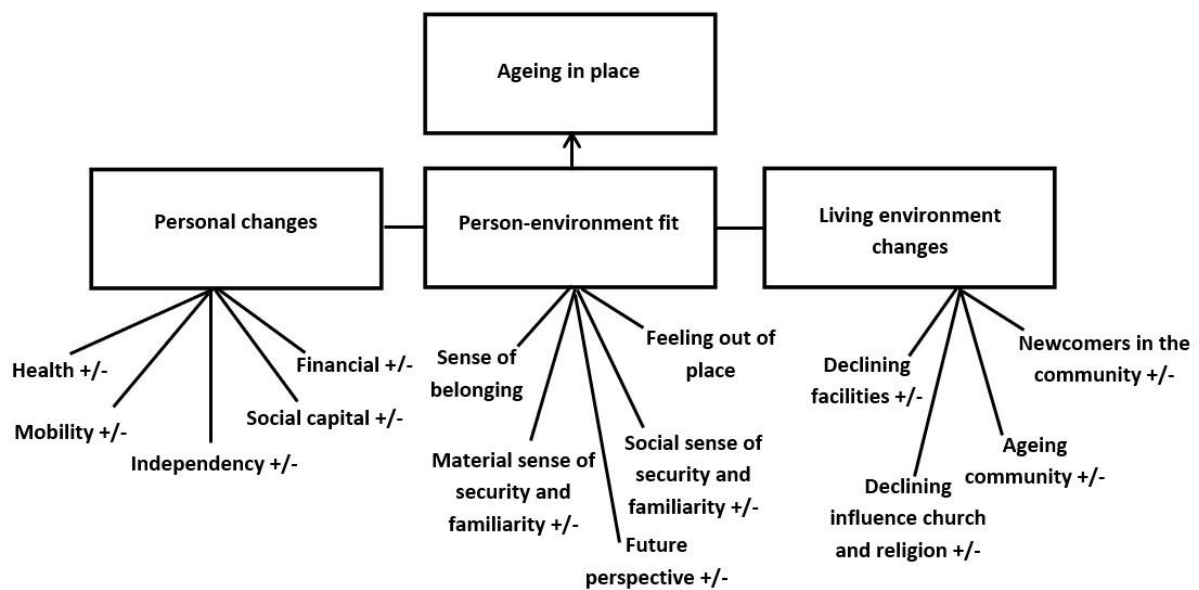


Figure 3. Coding tree

4.2. Personal changes

Findings show an omnipresent insecurity about health and independency that all participants experience. How one deals with this depends on personal abilities. An important factor is that there are no institutionalized care facilities for older people in the village, so when ageing in place is no longer possible, it is inevitable to leave familiar surroundings behind and move to a different village. Sometimes people will never return to the village again because it is too painful for them. Participant one about an old friend who is living in a nursing home outside the village:

“I tell her, have someone pick you up by car. But she says no, she does not want to go back to ‘de Plaat’, because it would be too difficult for her.”.

This fear of having to leave the village was also universal among all participants, but strongest apparent for people with most access to social capital. How people deal with this is addressed in chapter 4.4. Participant five described his experience about people who had to leave the village as follows:

“You go out of sight of the people and they go out of sight of us [the village]. And then you wonder, if this or that person is still alive.”.

Participant five, who lost his leg in a serious accident as a child and worked his whole life at the municipality office that improves independency of individuals by offering adjustments in their homes,

compared the faith of older people who cannot live independently anymore with the faith of handicapped children, who also have to leave the village for nursing homes.

Older people with the most serious health issues and limited mobility were generally more open to the idea of moving to a care facility outside of the village because their daily life is already very limited. For example a participant one with limiting disabilities:

“As long as I have something to do then it’s okay. But now that this is no longer possible I experience loneliness actually.”.

However people who want to move to an institutionalized care facility, face very strict entry requirements. Especially the most frail older adults expressed their worries about this because people in their network experienced great difficulties with this.

Participant one: “I’ve heard from people who were acting disabled, laying on bed when the inspection came, just in order to get into ‘Ebbe en Vloed’ [nursing home]. I asked them, are you not ashamed to act like this? And they said yes, but I have to get out of here.”.

Furthermore a solid retirement plan did help the three participants who are financially well off to age in place, because they have the financial resources to make adjustments to their homes that the government does not compensate and buy private assistance in and around the house. For example the government would only compensate the cheapest available stair lift but this did not fit on the spiral staircase of participant seven and eight, so they decided to buy a more appropriate stair lift themselves to enable ageing in their own home. Other participants who are not financially well off, had to move to an already adapted home that has all facilities on a levelled floor. Participant three was struggling to walk up the stairs every day to her front door, she could not get a stair lift from the government because facilities inside her home are all on the same level.

Another development that becomes clear from the experiences of participant two and five is that some social activities, are not passed on to next generations. The older adults can no longer organise these activities because of their decreasing health and mobility and since there are no younger members, it is not possible to take a less involving role if they physically not able to participate in these activities anymore, impacting their access to social capital negatively. For example, pigeon keeping and community gardening.

Participant two: “In the past when I went to my community garden in the evening there were always six, seven or eight people and we would sit on my bench. But now, if there is one other person that’s it. People do not want to do it anymore.”.

4.3. Living environment changes

Findings show that declining facilities like shops were not a major issue to most participants because there is a supermarket instead of many small shops.

Participant two: “In the past there used to be 10 or 12 small shops in ‘de Plaat’, if there were two customers inside it was full. But now we have a pretty decent supermarket, for a small village like this, where you can buy the same, if not more.”.

Participant six used to be a small shop owner that was ran out of business by the arrival of the supermarket and she really misses the time that all facilities were available in the village. In order to get other goods apart from groceries, older adults are often dependent on others for transport to these shops

or have others going to these shops in larger villages for them. However no participants experienced any difficulties with this. Online shopping is not used by any of the participants because they did not feel comfortable buying something they could not hold in their hands first.

Furthermore participants one, five and six are religious and experienced difficulties with declining influence of the church and its social functions. Some explain the decline of the church and other social activities, partly on the arrival of newcomers who have a more urban mindset and disturbed the Sunday-rest. But others explain this by the changing time and different lifestyle of the youth

Participant six: "On Sunday I am always going to the church and sometimes on the way there I see people hanging up laundry or washing their bicycle. Those are mostly 'overkanter' [people from the mainland]."

The newcomers that started arriving after completion of the main land connection changed the social structure of the village, and the local dialect declined in use.

Participant five: "In a small village everybody knows everybody. The good things and the bad things. Then when you have people coming in from outside, you always have to keep your distance and see how it develops. Some of them adapt but others also keep their distance to see what is going on in the village."

Even though it is difficult to deal with these cultural changes for some locally born and especially the religious participants, all acknowledged that times are inevitably changing and that adaptation is necessary in order to not be consumed by irritations. Some reports of dissatisfaction towards newcomers are described by several participants but not at all supported: "*De Plaat is for Platenaars*", meaning the village is for locals. Participant one: "*Adapting and giving each other space is the key.*"

Finally the ageing community and out migration of younger people does raise some concerns, but the housing shortage is pushing urbanites from the Rotterdam region south to the village, filling up these gaps according to multiple participants.

4.4. Person-environment fit

The interview show that there are currently still many social activities for older adults and most participants are satisfied with this. However some participants perceive these social activities as exclusive, making people feel out of place in some situations. For example activities organized by one church are not accessible by members of a different church.

Another finding is that there is a system of social control in the village, in which people look after each other. This is especially strong among older adults because they all have the same fear of having to leave the village when they cannot live independently anymore. While most participants that grew up in the village perceive a higher level of social control to be acceptable and essential for the community, those who moved to the village later in life find this challenging sometimes. For example participant 1 and 8 perceived a meeting place for older adults where other people's life's are discussed in-depth to be a place of gossips, while others consider it important to discuss the ups and downs of other people in the village.

Participant one: "Here on the countryside we have social control, sometimes it can be difficult, but it can also be comforting that people are paying attention when someone gets sick and help the person out when needed."

All participants experience a very strong sense of belonging in the village and most agree that a strong social sense of security and familiarity are the key to successfully age in place as long as possible. Most participants have concerns about the changing mentality of the younger generation and newcomers that shifts away from the social control that older people grew up with, because it is enabling them to age in place.

A material sense of familiarity is generally deemed of lesser importance than the social aspect by most participants, except for participant four, who was still living in the old farm house that he was born in and wants to stay there until the end:

"You stay in the same environment as where you grew up because it is really your own place. Let's be honest, if you go somewhere else you would always feel like a stranger."

Participant seven and eight were originally from the city of Rotterdam and grew up in a neighbourhood with strong social capital. As they grew older their neighbourhood deprived socio-economically and crime rates increased, which led to most locals leaving the neighbourhood. Participant seven mentions that eventually she felt *"Like a stranger in my own city"*. They moved to the village 23 years ago in search of this feeling of social connectedness they remembered from their childhood and found a better person-environment fit in Ooltgensplaat. Participant eight: *"I feel like we are absorbed by the village and part of the community."* Both describe they did have to work on getting absorbed by taking an active role in social activities in the local community.

Even though all participants who were not born in the village experience a sense of belonging in the village, participant one, who arrived in the village as one of the first newcomers 55 years ago mentioned the following:

"One thing, you will never become a 'Platenaar' if you were not born here. No matter how well you know everything and everyone, you will never become a 'Platenaar'."

Reflecting on their future perspectives, everybody wants to maintain their living conditions as much as possible and stay in their own home. However people with the most challenging disabilities were more open to the idea of moving to a nursing home.

5. Discussion

How do adults aged 70 years and older deal with changes in their personal life or living environment to ensure a strong person-environment fit, which facilitates ageing in place in the rural village of Ooltgensplaat on the former island of Goeree-Overflakkee, the Netherlands?

5.1. Reflection

One of the most important perspectives from the in-depth interviews is that older adult's ability to age in place in a rural community is determined mostly by their personal abilities and depends strongly on a network of social control and access to social capital. This social control is empowered by the communal fear of having to leave the village for a nursing home. Social capital is deemed as the essential key to ageing in place by most participants and it is what older adults use to deal with personal and environment changes in this case study. Similarly Vermeij (2016) and Vermeij and Mollenhorst (2008) also state that social capital is essential for successful ageing in villages.

Older adults with poor health and limited mobility are worried about the limited capacities of institutionalized care facilities and are unsure if there is place for them when their independency decreases. Wiles et al. (2012) described that some people appreciate the structure and organisation of a nursing home. The interview even showed some examples from older people sometimes exaggerate their disabilities in order to obtain a place in a nursing home.

Newcomers in the village changed the social structures in the community and even though the changed reality and mentality in the village sometimes causes frustrations, the sense of belonging of the participants is not affected. Both locally born and the newcomers adapt and give each other space.

Because there is such a strong focus on social capital in the village, declining facilities do not have a negative effect on participants when accessibility of services decreases like Moor et al. suggest (2022). There is always someone to assist t if needed. It is however easier for people who were born locally than for non-locals to find assistance because they have a larger social network in the village.

As suggested by Thissen and Droogleever Fortuijn (2021), a stronger financial position helps to make adjustments to one's home and hire private care, which increases independency of older adults. This socio-economical difference was confirmed in the interviews as well.

In this research, in-depth interviews proved an effective choice to achieve saturation, because the heterogeneity among participants demonstrates different perspectives on ageing in a Dutch village. The positionality of the researcher, having local kinship ties to the community, helped with finding participants and improved the naturalistic setting of the interviews. Also it improved the quality of the data because locally born older adults in the community are known to be less open to outsiders because of their cultural history, growing up in an autonomous community.

On the other hand, even though anonymity was guaranteed, participants might be hesitant to share sensitive personal information that they do not want other people in the community to know to an 'insider'. It is also important to note that prior to the interviews, the researcher's communication skills were mostly derived from commercial employment as sales representative, where an essential skill is to let the customers do the talking and listen to their needs. Similar to an interviewer letting the participant do the talking and listen to their perspectives, experiences and opinions. Furthermore the researcher did not have any experience in academic research, these skills were acquired while conducting this research.

Nevertheless, the in-depth interviews resulted in valuable knowledge and insights about the experiences of aging in a rural community that can be used in future research or by policy makers.

5.2. Conclusion

The interviews show that older adults mostly agree that ageing in place is best possible in a community where one is embedded in, and social capital is available to rely on. Social control is the most important enabler for ageing in place in this rural case. Social capital is used for support when personal changes or environment changes occur. This way a strong person-environment fit can be realised for as long as one's health allows ageing in place.

5.3. Recommendation

The main concern for older adults in this rural case study is the fear of having to leave the village when their independency decreases. Policy makers and spatial planners could address these concerns by considering age friendly buildings in new zoning plans, so that less older people have to leave the village because their home is not suitable anymore. Clustering these building makes it easier for home care organisations to organise more intensive care at home, instead of moving to a nursing home. This way people can remain in their familiar living environment and still rely on their social control system, instead of fully relying on health care when living in a nursing home in a different village. This will eventually benefit the society as a whole because it could release some of the pressure on the health care system and reduce overall costs.

Future academic research should focus on the inter-generational differences between older adults, because younger generations seem to be less embedded in the social control system that older adults are relying on now. This could change the way people experience ageing in place in a rural area in the future and further research is needed to anticipate on this.

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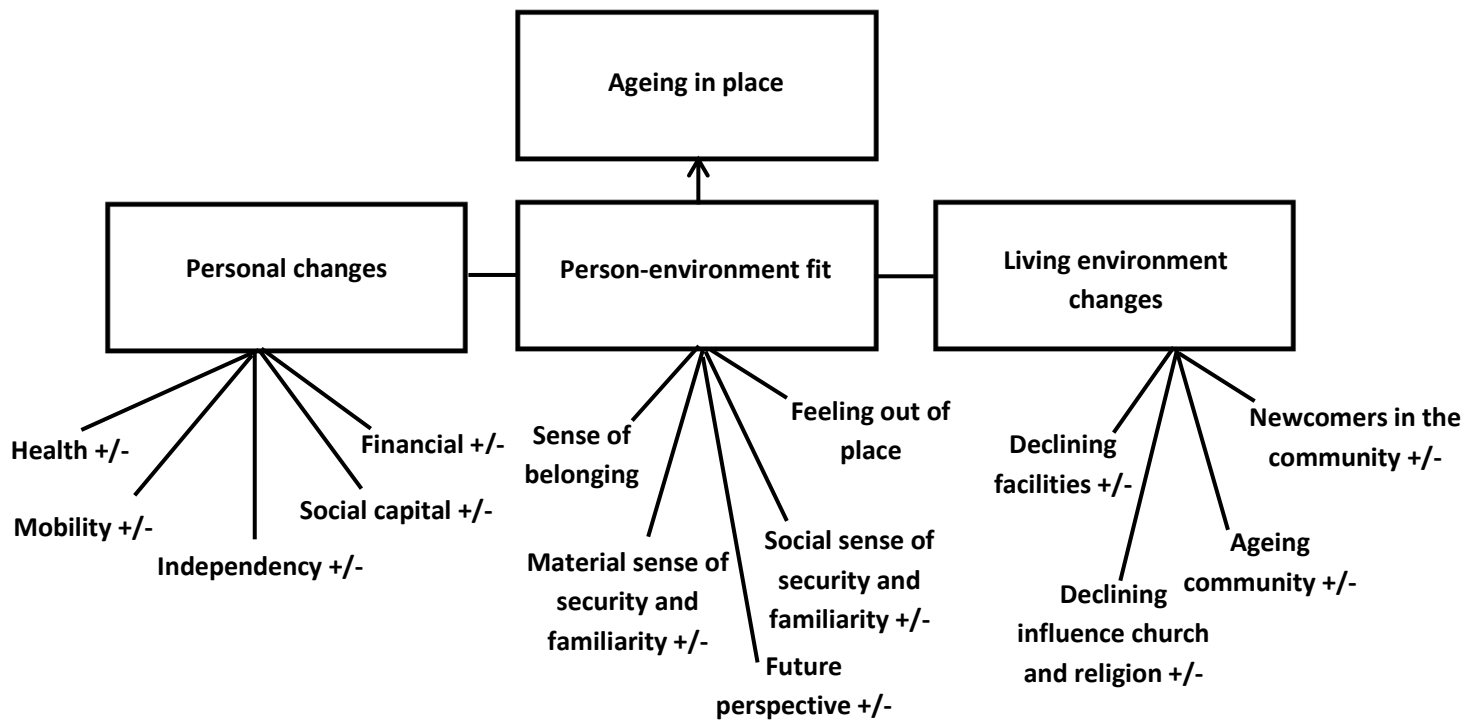
Attachments

Appendix 1: Code book

Fragments/quotes	Codes	Themes
<i>"I've had several surgeries and every time you are leaving something in the hospital"</i>	Health	Personal changes
<i>"I do not have a driving license anymore because I don't find myself capable enough to drive on the highway. But I bought a 45km car, so honestly I do not go further than Middelharnis or Numansdorp and Willemstad across the bridge. That way I can buy all my groceries, clothes, shoes and everything."</i>	Mobility	Personal changes
<i>"If I would come to be dependent on a wheel chair temporarily or permanent, then I have enough space here to roll through the house to the bed room and to the bath room."</i>	Independency	Personal changes
<i>"In the past when I went to my community garden in the evening there were always 6, 7 or 8 people and we would sit on my bench. But now, if there is 1 other person that's it. People do not want to do it anymore."</i>	Social capital	Personal changes
<i>"The girl [from the government] said I would not get a stair lift because I already live in a house with bath room and bed room on the ground floor. But yes I already though that. So because I had some money left, I decided to have it installed myself."</i>	Financial	Personal changes
<i>"In a small village everybody knows everybody. The good things and the bad things. Then when you have people coming in from outside, you always have to keep your distance and see how it develops. Some adapt but others also keep their distance to see what is going on in the village."</i>	New comers in the community	Living environment changes
<i>"In the neighbourhood where we are living now, you should not count on help from your neighbours because this is like a colony of old pinguins."</i>	Ageing community	Living environment changes
<i>"In the past there used to be 10 or 12 small shops in 'de Plaat', if there were 2 customers inside it was full. But now we have a pretty decent supermarket, for a small village like this, where you can buy the same, if not more"</i>	Declining facilities	Living environment changes
<i>"On Sunday I am always going to the church and sometimes on the way there I see people hanging up laundry or washing their bicycle. Those are mostly people from across [mainland]. On Sunday the village used to be very quiet and peaceful but now the cars and mopeds are flying around you. And my own grandchildren are also taking part in this. I do not mind so much as long as they stay decent."</i>	Declining influence church and religion	Living environment changes
<i>"Here on the countryside we have social control, sometimes it can be difficult, but it can also be comforting that people are paying attention when someone gets sick and help the person out when needed."</i>	Social sense of security and familiarity	Person-environment fit
<i>"You should not move people from their familiar environment. Like an old tree, you should not plant it elsewhere."</i>	Material sense of security and familiarity	Person-environment fit
<i>"You stay in the same environment as where you grew up because it is really your own place. Let's be honest, if you go somewhere else you would always feel like a stranger."</i>	Sense of belonging	Person-environment fit

<i>"I was very involved in the church and at the Fortress [camping], but now I am living here and I do not see anyone anymore"</i>	Feeling out of place	Person-environment fit
<i>"I hope to stay independent as long as possible and then I will pray to the Lord that He will take me away."</i>	Future perspective	Person-environment fit

Appendix 2: Code tree



Appendix 3: Participants characteristics

Characteristic	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6	Participant 7	Participant 8
Age participant	84	81	85	94	75	88	80	83
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Male
Former occupation	Camping supervisor, preacher, civil servant marriages	Factory worker, agricultural labour	Restaurant owner, voluntary work at nursing home	Farmer	Civil servant at social services department municipality	Shop owner	Housewife, voluntary work at nursing home	Zoo-keeper
Years living in the village	54	73	81	94	73	87	23	23
Birthplace	Rozenburg (Rotterdam)	Ooltgens-plaat	Ooltgens-plaat	Ooltgens-plaat	Ooltgens-plaat	Ooltgens-plaat	Rotterdam	Rotterdam
Strong retirement plan	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (from husband)	Yes
Current social activities	Meditation club	Community garden, visiting friends	Social club, visiting friends	None	Social club, driving to cafe's, visiting friends	Social club, church, visiting friends	Social club, visiting friends	Community garden, visiting friends
Lost social activities due to health limitations	Church, civil service, visiting friends	None	Voluntary work	Visiting friends	Pidgeon sport	None	None	Playing tennis
Living in a single floor house	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

Appendix 4: Original interview guide in Dutch

Introductie

- Introductie onderzoeker
 - o Onderwerp en doel onderzoek
 - o Informed consent
- Wat is uw leeftijd?
- Waar bent u geboren?
 - o Wanneer bent u naar het dorp verhuisd en waarom?
 - o Hoe lang woont u al in het dorp?

Personal changes

- Ervaart u gezondheidsproblemen die het dagelijks leven beperken?
 - o Hoe beïnvloedt dit uw mobiliteit?
 - o Weet u waar u terecht kunt voor de zorg die u nodig heeft?
 - o In hoeverre kunt u dankzij het zorgsysteem in Nederland thuis blijven wonen?
- In hoeverre vindt u zelf dat u zelfstandig woont?
 - o Wat betekent zelfstandigheid voor u?
 - o Hoe voelt u zich over uw zelfstandigheid met het oog op de toekomst als u ouder wordt?
- In hoeverre belemmert uw financiële situatie u om in de meest optimale woning en leefomgeving te wonen in deze fase van uw leven?
 - o Zou u naar een andere plaats of andere soort woning verhuizen als financiële middelen onbeperkt zijn?

Environment changes

- In de afgelopen decennia is er veel veranderd in het dorp, onder andere doordat er veel nieuwe mensen hier zijn komen wonen, op welke manier heeft dit uw leefomgeving veranderd?
 - o In hoeverre is de lokale identiteit hier door beïnvloedt denkt u?
 - o Hoe behoudt u uw identiteit in een veranderende omgeving?
- Volgens cijfers van de overheid wordt de gemiddelde leeftijd in het dorp steeds hoger vanwege de vergrijzing. In hoeverre maakt u zich daar zorgen over?
 - o Hoe beïnvloedt dit uw wens om te blijven waar u woont?
- In de afgelopen decennia zijn faciliteiten zoals winkels en sociale activiteiten verminderd in het dorp, hoe gaat u om met deze verandering?
 - o Zou dit een reden kunnen zijn om te verhuizen naar een ander dorp of stad met meer faciliteiten?
- Het overheidsbeleid stimuleert momenteel oudere mensen om zo lang mogelijk thuis te blijven wonen in de eigen wijk of dorp in plaats van te verhuizen naar een bejaardentehuis. Wat vindt u hier zelf van?
 - o Hoe ervaart u dit beleid zelf?
 - o Welke maatregelen neemt u om in uw eigen huis in het dorp te kunnen blijven wonen? (ergotherapeut)

Person-environment fit

- Hoe zou u uw sociale netwerk in het dorp het beste kunnen omschrijven?
 - o In hoeverre steunt u op uw sociale netwerk om thuis te kunnen blijven wonen?
 - o Hoe zou dit volgens u verbeterd kunnen worden?
- In hoeverre voelt u zich verbonden met de gemeenschap in het dorp?
 - o Hoe beïnvloedt dit uw wens om te blijven waar u woont?

Conclusion

- Wat zou volgens u de perfecte plaats zijn om oud te worden?
- Heeft u nog iets toe te voegen over het belang van ouder worden in de eigen buurt of dorp?

Appendix 5: Interview guide translated into English

Introduction

- Introduction researcher
- What is your age?
- Where were you born?
 - o When did you move to the village and why?
 - o How long do you live in the village?

Personal changes

- Do you experience health issues that prevent you from living your daily life?
 - o Do you know where to ask for the care you need?
 - o To what extent does the health care system support you to continue living at home?
- To what extent would you consider yourself to live independently?
 - o What does independence mean to you?
 - o How do you feel about your independence when anticipating further ageing?
- Is your economic situation preventing you from living in the most optimal residence at this stage in your life?
 - o Would you move to a different type of accommodation or a different place if financial resources were unlimited?

Environment changes

- In the past decades the community in the village changed a lot with introduction of many “newcomers”, how does this change affect your living environment?
 - o To what extent do you think the local identity is affected by this?
 - o How do you maintain your identity in a changing environment?
- The average age in the village is becoming higher because many young people leave and older people stay, do you experience any concerns accordingly?
 - o How do you act upon these concerns?
 - o How does this influence your desire to stay living where you are?
- In the past decades facilities such as shops and social activities reduced in the village, how do you deal with this change?
 - o Could this be a reason to move to another village with more facilities and shops?
- Government policies stimulate older adults to live at home as long as possible, instead of institutionalised care, what do you think of this?
 - o How do you experience these policies yourself?
 - o What measures do you take to continue living in your own home?

Person-environment fit

- How would you describe your social network in your village?
 - o To what extent does your social network help you to live in your current home?
 - o How could this be improved in your opinion?
- To what extent do you feel like an insider/local in the village’s community?
 - o How does this affect your desire to stay in the community?

Conclusion

- What would be the perfect place to grow old in your opinion?
- Anything to add regarding the importance to continue living in your own neighbourhood or village?

Appendix 6: Informed consent

Toestemmingsformulier voor onderzoeksproject:

Hoe gaan personen ouder dan 70 jaar om met veranderingen in hun persoonlijke leven of leefomgeving, en hoe beïnvloedt dit de wens om ouder te worden in de eigen wijk of dorp? Door Jeffrey Braber, student aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Hierin verklaart de deelnemer het volgende: Ik heb vooraf informatie over het onderzoeksproject verkregen. Ik kon vragen stellen en mijn vragen werden beantwoord naar tevredenheid. Ik heb genoeg tijd gehad om te beslissen om mee te doen aan het onderzoek.

Mijn deelname is geheel vrijwillig. Ik kan mij op elk moment terugtrekken uit het onderzoek, zonder dat ik hiervoor een reden hoeft op te geven. Ik geef toestemming voor het gebruik van de interviewgegevens voor de volgende doeleinden: onderzoeksproject, presentaties en educatieve doeleinden. Ik stem ermee in om deel te nemen aan dit interview.

Naam en handtekening van de deelnemer:

Plaats en Datum:

De onderzoeker verklaart de deelnemer te hebben geïnformeerd over het onderzoek en verder de deelnemer te informeren over zaken die zijn/haar deelname aan het onderzoek zouden kunnen beïnvloeden.

Naam en handtekening van de onderzoeker:

Plaats en datum:
