

# Relocation of the Elderly: A Social Context for Stress

Leslie S. Lareau

*Studies of the relocation of the elderly have generally been done from an atheoretical perspective. This paper presents a theory which is derived from the integration of a theory of general housing adjustment, a theory of relocation, and a theory of stress handling. Some of the implications of this theory are discussed in terms of variable selection, hypothesis formation, and management practices.*

There is general agreement in the gerontological literature that relocation is associated with important changes in the lives of those elderly who relocate (Schulz and Brenner, 1977). There is little agreement, however, on the effect that this important life event has on those who experience it. Some researchers have found relocation to be associated with such negative effects as reduced life span, lowered life satisfaction, and reduced health (Schooler, 1975; Schulz and Aderman, 1973), while others have reported no such negative effects (Carp, 1968; Lawton and Yaffe, 1970).

Some attempts have been made to identify and explore intervening variables which could be influencing the effect that relocation has on an individual. The variables that have been identified can be classified into three types; those which describe pre-move life experiences or pre-move environmental characteristics, those which describe the person's coping style or habitual response patterns, and those which describe post-

move experiences in or characteristics of the post-move environment.

One of the most interesting attempts to identify variables that describe pre-move life experience or environmental characteristics is found in Beckman's (1969) participant observation study of a retirement village. Noting large variations both in the length of time different persons took to adapt to the new environment and in the success of the adaptation, Beckman observed that the nature of past occupational experience seemed to be a variable that influenced relocation outcome. He noted that those individuals who had had occupations that involved a high level of human contact (e.g., social worker or teacher) seemed to have a positive reaction to the relocation to the relatively dense environment of the retirement village while those persons who had occupations in which they were relatively isolated (e.g., farmers or childless housewives) seemed to react negatively to the relocation. Other important variables of this type which may influence relocation outcome have been identified by Carp (1970). Even though her sample was, in general, well satisfied with the new environment, she did indicate that pre-retirement socioeconomic status and location of previous

*Leslie S. Lareau is an Assistant Professor in the Housing Research and Development Program and in the Department of Human Development and Family Ecology at the University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois.*

residence seemed to influence the impact relocation had on the individual.

Few variables of the second type, those that describe an individual's coping style or habitual response pattern, have been identified in the literature. Schulz and Brenner (1977) hypothesized the existence of this variable type and suggested that a person who views himself as one who controls his own fate would fare poorly when relocating from a high-control to a low-control environment. Carp (1970) also identified variables which seemed to influence relocation outcome and which fit into this type; sociability, optimism, and intelligence.

Several researchers have identified variables of the third type, those which describe post-move experiences or environmental characteristics. Much attention has been given to variables describing the physical environment (c.f. Carp, 1970, 1975). Since these physical characteristics variables do not explain the effects of relocation on the individual, researchers have turned to other less direct variables. Beckman (1969) identified management characteristics as an important variable influencing relocation outcome, while Carp (1970) indicated that physical and mental health, presence of spouse, and present income were important factors. Both Pastorello (1973) and Schooler (1975) identified the availability of a confidant as being an extremely important factor. Schooler, who had previously found that home-to-home relocation had a negative effect on morale and health, indicated that the presence of a confidant reduced this negative impact to zero.

Although all of these variables which have been identified seem to be empirically reasonable, they have generally not been derived from nor integrated into a theoretical context. Thus the literature provides little understanding of why the intervening variables operate as they do and little guidance for the researcher who wishes to identify additional variables which may be influential in relocation outcome. One attempt has been made (Schulz and Brenner, 1977) to provide a *post hoc* theoretical framework for the relocation

literature. While offering some new insights concerning relocation, it was integrated neither into a general theory of housing adjustment nor into a theory of the behavior of persons in a social as opposed to an experimental laboratory situation. In the following section, a general theory of housing adjustment will be reviewed and its relationship to Schulz and Brenner's theory will be discussed. Following that, the two theoretical approaches will be integrated into a theoretical framework which allows both for the explanation of the operation of already identified variables and the formulation of hypotheses concerning additional intervening variables.

### Theoretical Framework

Morris and Winter (1975) have presented a general theory of housing adjustment as a continuous process through which a family (or presumably, an elderly person as a family of one) evaluates their current housing. The evaluation proceeds through the comparison of a set of cultural and family norms with the existing housing situation. Should the resident perceive that the housing falls significantly short of the cultural norms, a normative housing deficit (NHD) exists and the resident may, according to the model, deal with the NHD in any one of three major ways: (1) residential mobility, (2) residential adaptation, or (3) family adaptation. Should it be impossible to alter the housing conditions in one of these three ways, the family is then left with the option of altering its family norms in order to bring the NHD to an effective value of zero. Thus, Morris and Winter's model describes a system in which the movement is from effective NHD to a solution that relates directly to the perceived problem.

The theory developed by Schulz and Brenner (1977), while not based on a general theory of housing adjustment, does help to flesh out the theory described above. After reviewing the literature on the relocation of the elderly, Schulz and Brenner determined that relocation could be

most profitably viewed as a stressful situation. Since stress is an inherent aspect of relocation, the effects of that relocation, they argued, should be mediated by the same factors that operate in laboratory research on stress. Laboratory research concerning the effects of stressful situations on both animals and humans had suggested that two factors, control and predictability, serve to mediate the effects of stress on an organism. Schulz and Brenner interpreted the factor "control" primarily in regard to circumstances surrounding the actual relocation event. They mapped the control factor directly onto the voluntary-involuntary dimension in the relocation literature. Voluntary relocation was seen as a high control situation while involuntary relocation was seen as a low control situation. Thus, they reasoned, a voluntary relocation should have a less negative effect than that produced by an involuntary relocation.

Predictability was considered to be a factor closely related to the similarity of the two environments, the old and the new. A new environment which was similar to the old would be high in predictability while a new, but dissimilar environment would be low in predictability. Since the greater the predictability of a stressor, the less negative the effects of that stress, relocation situations in which predictability is high should have a less negative effect than those situations in which predictability is low.

Schulz and Brenner operationalized the predictability factor by classifying the relocation literature according to the similarity of the pre-move and post-move environments. Three types of moves were identified; those from home to home, those from institution to institution, and those from home to institution. Persons making one of the first two types of moves would find the new environment relatively predictable while those making the last type of move, home to institution, would find the new environment relatively unpredictable. Within these three types, Schulz and Brenner operationalized the control factor by equating it with the variable which described the

move as either voluntary or involuntary. This then produced a matrix of six types of moves which could be used as a framework for examining the existing literature. Although admitting to reservations because of the *post hoc* nature of their analysis and mentioning the impact of the quality of the physical and psychological environment, Schulz and Brenner concluded that the literature they reviewed provided support for the importance of the control and predictability factors in determining the outcome of the move.

In addition to being influenced by factors of control and predictability, Schulz and Brenner hypothesized that an individual's reaction to relocation is also influenced by "enduring aspects of his personality and by his past experiences in similar situations" (Schulz and Brenner, 1977: 324). Thus, a person who valued highly his/her own independence of action would be adversely affected by relocation to an environment in which there was little room for independence. They pinpointed the need both for the collection of data on individual differences and for the construction of a model which would explain the process through which control and predictability affect the individual.

The integration of Schulz and Brenner's theory with the more general housing adjustment theory of Morris and Winter (1975) which has already been described can do much to clarify the process that is involved in adjustment to relocations. The housing adjustment theory has as its core the comparison of norms with the reality a person encounters (Morris and Winter, 1975; Morris, Crull, and Winter, 1976). This process which is similar to that envisioned by such varied theorists as Vickers (1957, 1959), Mead (1962), and Bateson (1972) is one in which the person experiences feedback. The NHD identified by Morris and Winter is basically a measure of negative feedback that results from a mismatch of the norms and reality. As Vickers (1957) has noted, the inevitable result for the individual of negative feedback is stress. Thus, the stress identified by Schulz and Brenner can be seen as the factor that

temporally intervenes between the NHD identified by Morris and Winter and the solutions that they describe. That is, a person can not move instantly from a perception of a NHD to a resolution of the NHD. Rather, the person experiences a period of stress during which alternative courses of action and their possible consequences are evaluated.

The reasons behind the operation of the predictability factor become clearer when the housing adjustment model is brought into consideration. Schulz and Brenner described high predictability situations as ones in which the new environment following relocation closely matched the previous environment in which the person had lived. The negative effects of such situations were found to be less than those of low predictability in which the new environment was quite different from the old environment. This is in agreement with Morris and Winter's theory. According to their model, the similarity of the pre-move and post-move environments would result in a zero or near zero NHD since the modified family norms which the resident had developed to fit the original situation would match well the new, similar situation.

The control factor identified by Schulz and Brenner can be clarified also by reference to Morris and Winter's theory. As previously described, their theory allows for three direct means of dealing with a NHD; one may choose to move, adapt the housing, or change the family. If a person is readily able to reduce the NHD through one of these options, the person can be said to be in high control situation; that is, the person has the resources to improve his/her housing condition through directly modifying the environment or the family composition. A person in such a situation can be thought of as choosing an alternative which closely matches his/her cultural norms.

Many elderly who relocate are not in such an optimum situation. For example, the norms in our culture label owner-occupied, single-family detached housing as superior to other types (Morris, Crull, and Winter, 1976). This is often the type of

housing *from* which elderly persons must relocate as they face declining functional ability and the resultant inability to care for themselves in such an environment. Rather than being motivated by the usual type of NHD, an elderly person faced with increasing frailty and limited financial resources is motivated by his/her own inability to operate in housing that complies with cultural norms. This is then a low control situation. The person is unable to control or adjust his/her own situation in such a way as to match the cultural norms. The elderly person is then left with the task of choosing an option such as relocation which will insure his/her continued survival while at the same time coping with the additional task of modifying his/her family norms. In Morris and Winter's terms, such a relocation would not by itself reduce the NHD to zero, while in Schulz and Brenner's terms the individual's control over the situation is low. Following either theory then, one would reach the same hypothesis; that is, that persons who must relocate but who are unable to relocate into a home that meets the cultural norms would be less than completely satisfied (experience a NHD or stress due to the weakness of the control factor).

Although the two theories align well in respect to an understanding of control and predictability, there is a major difference in their overall presentations. Morris and Winter's model describes a system which has the goal of maintaining the NHD at an effective zero. Thus, the model describes an automatic movement pattern from problem (NHD) to solution.

Schulz and Brenner's model, however, describes the process as being one which centers around the individual's reaction to the situation of relocation. Thus their model portrays a movement from problem to stress with very little attention given to the possibility of any solution. Rather, the degree of stress and hence the effect of the relocation on the individual is seen as being more or less automatically determined by the factors of control and predictability. Morris and Winter's model, however, offered three other

options which the individual could use to reduce the NHD and thus to alleviate the stress. These three options are (1) to fail to perceive the NHD, (2) to perceive the NHD as insignificant, and (3) to modify the family norms in such a way that the norms more closely match the actual housing situation. These options are indirect ones which operate not on the actual environmental situation but on the individual who is acting in that situation.

An additional indirect solution that was considered neither by Morris and Winter nor by Schulz and Brenner is that of operating directly on the stress without modifying either the environment, the family compositions or the family norms (Lareau, 1977). That is, a person who must live in a housing situation which does not meet the cultural norms may seek out ways to reduce the resultant stress. Menninger (1957) listed several stress reducing mechanisms which people use to alleviate stress in this manner:

1. touch, rhythm, soft voices,
2. efforts to establish human contact (e.g. gain approval, win love),
3. "laughing it off," "crying it out,"
4. falling asleep,
5. "talking it out," praying,
6. thinking,
7. muscular activity,
8. fantasizing and dreaming, and
9. parapraxis and swearing.

Two other such reactions which seem to be currently in common use can be added to this list:

10. physiologically or esthetically enjoyable activities (e.g. eating, creative hobbies, sexual activity), and
11. reaction-dulling chemicals (alcohol, mood altering drugs).

None of the actions on this list do anything to change the physical environment or the norms, yet the choice of such actions may serve two purposes. First, it may make the person more comfortable during the period from the perception of a NHD to the implementation of a solution. (In circumstances which are such that no solution

can be forthcoming, this period may last for the remainder of the person's life.) For example, a person who habitually engages in strenuous muscular activity has a ready means of alleviating the stress that may result from housing that does not meet the cultural norms, thus easing the period of adaptation to the new environment. Likewise, Schooler's (1975) finding that the presence of a confidant eliminates the negative impact of a move is made more comprehensible. Interaction with the confidant would provide opportunities for the use of several of Menninger's mechanisms for controlling stress (e.g., gaining approval, "talking it out," "laughing it off") while also offering the opportunity for discussions that may help the individual modify his/her norms to more closely match the actual situation.

Second, the use of these stress relieving mechanisms may forestall the identification of a NHD as salient or significant. According to Morris and Winter's model, no action will be taken to correct a NHD until that NHD is perceived as salient. If a person is in the habit of using these mechanisms to reduce the stress of a NHD, the stress may very well remain below the stress threshold that Vickers (1957) perceived as being the individually varying trigger for action. Thus, for example, a person whose time is filled with loving contacts with family and friends would be less likely to be concerned about a NHD than would a more isolated and lonely person.

The handling of NHD through the use of stress reducing mechanisms may actually be the most common means of dealing with a NHD. Certainly it offers a ready means of action that logically is temporally prior to a more direct solution. This is, before a person implements one of the direct courses of action (moving, remodeling, changing family composition) which Morris and Winter viewed as the normal reaction to a NHD, a person will experience stress and will react directly to that stress. In general, the stress relieving mechanism can be used with less disruption to one's early life and with less resource expenditure than the more direct means.

Menninger's stress relieving mechanisms are not all of equal efficacy in handling stress and thus are not of equal efficacy in postponing a more major adaptation or in coping with an irreconcilable NHD. Some, such as parapraxis and swearing, offer only a very short term alleviation while others, such as drugs, are effective for major stress only if used to such an extreme degree that they are accompanied by negative social and/or physiological consequences. In general, a person would tend to use a combination of these mechanisms to buffer the NHD that results whenever the norms do not match the housing situation. Controlling stress in this way may be for most persons a much less painful way of coping with a NHD than modifying the cultural norms since Bateson (1972) reported that people will go to great lengths to avoid making such changes.

In summation, this theoretical perspective which is derived from an integration of a relocation theory with a general housing adjustment theory supplemented by a theory of stress handling, views a NHD as intrinsically stress producing. A person may deal with a NHD by using three general methods; 1) by controlling the stress caused by the NHD, 2) by changing some aspect(s) of the housing situation, and/or 3) by changing the norms relative to housing. The choice of the method(s) will depend in a large part on the resources available. Many elderly, since their NHDs may result from such factors as increased frailty which results in their inability to function in housing that meets their cultural norms, will be unable to effectively use the second option. The solution then is either to use the first option as a solution or to use it as a temporary stopgap until the third option is implemented.

### **Relation to Variable Selection**

This model suggests that studies on the impact of relocation have in the past put too little emphasis on variables that describe the stress relieving mechanisms that are available to and used by elderly persons who relocate. Pastorello (1973)

and Schooler (1975) were able to document the impressive ability to counteract the negative effects of relocations of one of the mechanisms but systematic studies of other such mechanisms have not been made. This model suggests that, in order for the effects of relocation to be understood, the researcher must be cognizant of the patterns of stress control used by his/her population. It would be fallacious to assume that elderly persons have equal access to and similar patterns of use of the various ways of controlling stress. For instance, isolated elderly persons who have no available family members or confidants, will not be able to readily talk out their problems nor will they be able to readily establish the sort of human contact that can provide feelings of approval and love. Likewise, a very frail elderly person who had in the past used a pattern of stress control which relied solely on muscular activity will be unable to continue to use exercise as a means of controlling stress. Some examples of areas of inquiry that researchers might want to pursue for the purpose of collecting data descriptive of individuals' varying approaches to the handling of stress are:

1. friendship patterns (casual and confident),
2. family interactions,
3. religious practices,
4. hobbies (creative and active),
5. sleep patterns,
6. drug use, and
7. quantity and quality of contact with staff (managers, nurses) if applicable.

In addition to the data describing stress controlling mechanisms, two other major types of variables should be investigated: 1) those that describe the norms relative to housing, and 2) those that describe the housing situation. The first category, those that describe the norms, has been largely neglected in literature relative to the elderly. Although the housing norms of the general population have received significant study, the norms are believed to vary according to such factors as geographical region and farm versus

non-farm backgrounds. Also, since families may develop and alter individual norms which serve to modify the cultural norms (Morris and Winter, 1975), the norms which an individual person possesses may vary in significant ways from the general cultural norms. It is important for the researcher to determine the norms held by the members of his/her specific population in regard to tenure, structure, quality, and environs. Since the effects of relocation result from a process of comparison between norms and reality, an analysis that includes consideration of norms should provide a precise understanding of the effects of relocation than an analysis that relies on consideration of previous residence type such as that proposed by Schultz and Brenner (1977).

Variables describing the housing situation are the ones that have been most extensively considered (e.g., Carp 1970, 1975). They have, however, been used only as indicators of housing quality and to provide a general description of the housing to which the subjects have relocated. Specifically, the researcher should endeavor to collect variables that describe the housing situation in ways comparable to the variables that describe the norms.

It is important to bear in mind that while relocation studies should include these three major types of variables, they should not be limited to these alone. Certainly the research plan must include the outcome types of variables (e.g., Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale; Morris and Sherwood, 1975) consideration of which is outside the scope of this paper. In addition, it is vital that the research emphasis not be placed so heavily on relocation that other stress producing situations in the person's life are ignored. Just as individuals vary in the efficacy with which they alleviate stress, they also vary in the degree of stress that they receive as a result of experiences other than relocation. Thus the researcher will need to collect information on such subjects as income, health status, and recent deaths of family members. In some environments in which relocation studies are appropriate such as public hous-

ing for the elderly, there are admission criteria which in effect control for income and health status thus simplifying the data collection.

### Relation to Hypotheses Formation

The general hypothesis that results from this theory is that the effect of relocation on elderly persons will depend on two factors: 1) the degree to which the housing situation matches the norms the individual has developed, and 2) the availability and use of stress relieving mechanisms. One sub-hypothesis, that relocated elderly who have confidants (which provide a means of implementing a variety of stress relieving mechanisms) suffer fewer ill effects from relocation, has already been tested in the literature and upheld (Pastorello, 1973; Schooler, 1975). Other sub-hypotheses can be developed from the general theory which are applicable to specific situations. The following list contains five examples of such hypotheses.

1. Elderly persons who have a close family network will fare better when relocated than similar persons who have no available family members.
2. Elderly nursing home residents who are cared for by a warm, friendly staff will fare better when relocated than those who are cared for in a cold, impersonal fashion.
3. Elderly persons who have a strong interest in a creative or an active hobby and who are able to continue that hobby will fare better when relocated than those who have no such interest.
4. Elderly persons who relocate to housing which matches their norms will fare better than those who relocate to housing which does not match their norms.
5. Elderly persons who have an ongoing pattern of religious participation will fare better when relocated than will elderly persons who do not have such a pattern.

Many other situation-specific hypotheses could be developed from the more general theory. One

of the most fruitful areas of research would possibly be the development of an index of the use of stress relieving mechanisms which would combine both quantitative and qualitative measures.

### **Implications for Professionals Dealing with the Elderly**

This model, which describes relocation as a stress that occurs in a social context, offers some important implications for those who are concerned directly with environments for the elderly. Most importantly, professionals should recognize that it is normal to experience stress as a result of relocation and that the stress may continue until the person has gone through the often slow process of changing his/her norms. Normal social life does however offer means of lessening the impact of the stress. Professionals who deal with the elderly should be sensitive to these means and should facilitate opportunities for the types of activities, interactions, and relationships which can provide relief of stress. For example, housing managers should be aware that a warm friendly demeanor towards the elderly residents can help to improve the residents quality of life by being conducive to stress relief. Likewise, those who work with institutionalized elderly should be aware that means other than drug use can be used to reduce the stress attendant with relocation.

### **Conclusion**

A theory has been developed which combines general housing adjustment theory with a theory of stress control. The need for the collection of data describing individual norms, the housing situation, and stress relieving mechanisms has been discussed. Suggestions of necessary variables, of hypotheses derived from the theory, and of a few of the implications of the theory have been presented.

### **References**

- Atchley, R. 1977. *The Social Forces in Later Life*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Beckman, R. D. 1969. "Acceptance of Congregate Life in a Retirement Village." *The Gerontologist* 9:281-285.
- Carp, F. W. 1968. "Effects of Improved Housing on the Lives of Older People." B. Neugarthen Editor. *Middle Age and Aging*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carp, F. W. 1970. "The Elderly and Levels of Adaptation to Changed Surroundings." L. Pastalan and D. Carson Editors. *Spatial Behavior of Older People*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan — Wayne State University Institute of Gerontology.
- Carp, F. W. 1975. "Impact of Improved Housing on Morale and Life Satisfaction." *The Gerontologist*, 15:511-515.
- Lareau, L. 1977. "Widowhood in a Rural Environment." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois.
- Lawton, M. P. and S. Yaffe. 1970. "Mortality, Morbidity, and Voluntary Change of Residence by Older People." *Journal of American Geriatrics Society* 18:823-831.
- Mead, G. H. 1962. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Menninger, K. A. 1957. "Psychological Aspects of the Organism Under Stress." *General Systems* 2:142-172.
- Morris, E. W. and M. Winter. 1975. "A Theory of Family Housing Adjustment." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 37:79-88.
- Morris, E. W., S. R. Crull, M. Winter. 1976. "Housing Norms, Housing Satisfaction and the Propensity to Move." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 38:309-321.
- Pastorello, T. 1973. *Structural Changes in Morale Among the Residentially Mobile Elderly*. Meetings of the Gerontological Society, Miami.

- Schooler, K. 1975. "Response of the Elderly to Environment: A Stress-Theoretical Perspective." P. Windley, T. Byerts, and F. Ernst Editors. *Theory Development in Environment and Aging*. Washington, D.C.: The Gerontological Society.
- Schulz, R. and D. Adermann. 1973. "Effect of Residential Change on the Temporal Distance to Death of Terminal Cancer Patients." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 4:157-162.
- Schulz R. and G. Brenner. 1977. "Relocation of the Aged: A Review and Theoretical Analysis." *The Gerontologist* 32 (3): 323-333.
- Vickers, G. 1957. "Control, Stability, and Choice." *General Systems* 2:1-8.
- Vickers, G. 1959. "The Concept of Stress in Relation to the Disorganization of Human Behavior." *General Systems* 4:243-247.