

ELDERLY WOMEN LIVING ALONE: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Recent demographic and historical trends have generated a growing interest in the special population of elderly women who live alone. Most housing and gerontological experts view this population at risk for institutionalization and loss of independent living. Five underlying assumptions and themes are identified in past research on elderly housing. These five areas are (a) a reliance on socio-psychological explanations of people's attitudes; (b) the use of survey-research data and quantitative, analytic techniques; (c) a focus on the elderly as consumers of housing; (d) a concern for the role of government as provider of housing to the elderly; and (e) the perception of housing as an environment with variable interpretations by the residents. Several limitations to the use of current methodological and theoretical approaches are cited. A reorientation based on a feminist-materialist perspective is used as a method to address the limitations of past research on housing and to examine elderly women living alone.

Introduction

Elderly people who live alone, particularly women, merit special attention in the area of housing. Although recent work has begun to focus on this population group, previous methodological and theoretical frameworks have failed to include elderly women living alone within the institutional processes which organize the social and material character of housing. In order to address this limitation, this study examines the literature of housing as it relates to elderly women who live alone and provides a critique and reorientation derived from the feminist methodology articulated by Dorothy Smith (1987).

Housing and aging specialists working primarily with socio-demographic data view elderly women living alone as a population at risk of nursing home admission and loss of independent living. Following a presentation of these data we present a brief overview of the literature on housing and aging in order to demonstrate how Smith's methodology differs from standard social scientific practices; thus, the review is selective and illustrative rather than exhaustive. This review considers major trends in the socio-gerontological literature on housing and suggests several areas which are neglected or given insignificant attention. Finally, the feminist-materialist alternative is outlined with an emphasis on its potential to address research gaps in the housing literature.

Demographics

The proportion of the U.S. population over age 65 has risen from 8 percent in 1950 to 11 percent in 1980 and estimated to reach 13 percent by 2000. Thirty percent of these people (8.5 million) currently live alone. Almost 80 percent of the elderly living alone are women (6.5 million). Furthermore, the likelihood of living alone increases with age: 24 percent of those age 65 to 74 live alone. The percentage increases to 39 percent for those age 75 to 84, and 45 percent for those 85 or older. While the proportion of elderly

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is projected to remain relatively constant over the next 30 years, the sex ratio is expected to change. Due to the growth of older population groups, it is likely women will comprise 85 percent of the elderly who live alone by 2020 (Kasper, 1988).

The elderly living alone are different from other elderly people in that they are disproportionately poor, 75 years or over, apartment dwellers, renters, widowed, and without children (Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., 1986). The poverty rate for those living alone is 18 percent; an additional 24 percent are near-poor (148 percent of the poverty line). The poverty rate is expected to remain the same for the next 15 years before dropping to 15 percent by 2020. The decline in poverty will be overwhelmingly experienced by men. Thirty-eight percent of men living alone were poor or near-poor in 1987. The percentage is expected to drop by about one half by 2000 and fall to 6 percent by 2020. For women, 45 percent were poor or near-poor in 1987. Thirty-eight percent will be at these levels in 2020. The economic situation is expected to be worse for older women living alone who are 75 years or older (Kasper, 1988). Clearly, this segment of the population is in economic danger.

Elderly people living alone are also at risk of losing their health and women are particularly vulnerable to losing their independence (Kovar, 1986; Wilson, Kovar, and Havlik, 1987). The poor health of this segment of the population is explained in part by the high poverty rate for those living alone (Minkler and Stone, 1985) and by their advanced age. Moreover, living alone increases the likelihood of confinement to a nursing home. The relationship stands even if age is controlled. Of women who reside in nursing homes, three fourths are widowed on admission (Kasper, 1988).

Literature Review

Trends

The literature on housing and the elderly demonstrates significant research interests in a wide variety of interrelated areas. These interests include housing satisfaction, housing adequacy, residential location, living arrangements, alternative housing, housing services, housing policy, migration, adaptation, overhousing, neighborhood satisfaction, architectural design, housing problems, planning, and housing economics. This review suggests the following typical selection and treatment of topics on elderly housing: (a) a reliance on socio-psychological explanations of attitudes; (b) the use of survey-research data and quantitative, analytic techniques; (c) a focus on the elderly as "consumers" of housing; (d) a concern for the role of government in the provision of housing to the elderly; and (e) the perception of housing as an environment with variable interpretations by the residents.

A concern for socio-psychological (attitudinal) investigation stands out in the body of research which investigates housing satisfaction (or neighborhood satisfaction in some cases) both as an independent and a dependent variable (Carp, 1966; Devlin, 1980; Golant, 1982; La Gory, Ward, and Sherman, 1985; Lawton, 1976; Lawton, Nahemow, and Teaff, 1975; Lawton and Nahemow, 1979; Lawton, Nahemow, and Tsong-Min-Yeh, 1980). Butterfield and Weidemann (1987) note that following the failure of some major public housing programs, housing satisfaction has replaced other economic, physical, and social measures of housing adequacy. Researchers have attempted to discover the sources of housing satisfaction, the impact of housing satisfaction on various indices of social and psychological well-being, and its relationship to various individual characteristics.

The reliance on quantitative, analytic techniques is evident in much of the literature cited above and in other areas such as research focusing on residential location, housing types, and living arrangements. The research in these areas relies on survey data, usually census data or the U.S. National Housing Survey. Various arguments are advanced for the significance of this line of investigation. It is noted that "housing type" and "living arrangements" are determinants which shape the daily living patterns of elderly individuals and they contribute to general well-being (Connidis and Rempel, 1983; Law-

ton, 1981). Findings demonstrate that living arrangements are related to economic resources, levels of functional disability, and social support (Soldo, Sharma, and Campbell, 1984; Wolf, 1984). Residential location is significant because of its relationship to transportation and services (Hiltner and Smith, 1974; Smith and Hiltner, 1975). In addition, these variables are important when considering housing as a financial resource of the elderly (Schreter and Turner, 1986) or as a shelter for future generations (Lane and Feins, 1985).

The elderly as consumers of housing are examined with regard to an array of political and economic issues. These issues include the utilization of the housing stock, the need for specific types of housing, the allocation of federal funds for housing programs, and the use of housing as an economic resource. Consideration of these issues leads to concerns which are significant for housing policy. These concerns are the possible over-housing of the elderly and under-utilization of dwellings (Lane and Feins, 1985; Schreter and Turner, 1986), and the problem of housing demand by the elderly relative to housing supply (Lawton and Hoover, 1981; Newman, Zais, and Struyk, 1984; Struyk and Soldo, 1980).

Gerontologists are sharply divided over the role of the federal government as a provider of housing. The federal government has been involved in housing since the 1930s and has encouraged residential construction and improvements that ameliorate the home-environment conditions of the poor (Solomon, 1974); however, debate continues regarding the nature of past and present government involvement. During a recent Ollie Randall Symposium of the Gerontological Society of America the main speakers argued for an expanded role of government in providing housing assistance and alternatives (Lawton, 1985; Newman, 1985; Struyk, 1985). Their discussion assumes that the government would act in the best interests of the needy elderly if provided with sufficient information and resources. On the other hand, some political economists challenge the assumption that the state plays such a benevolent role (Ball, 1983; Olson, 1982; Guillemard, 1985). These critics assert that the state is primarily organized to support the economic and political interests of the banking and housing industries rather than the well-being of the elderly. Finally, the tendency to conceptualize housing as phenomena with symbolic meanings is quite apparent. This development springs from several sources. First, the inconsistencies that are discovered when one compares objective and subjective evaluations of housing lead some investigators to employ an interactionist perspective in their research (Golant, 1982, 1984). Secondly, as psychologists and phenomenologists directed their attention to elderly housing they brought with them an interest in the subjective meaning of home, the connection between internal and external realities, and the psychological responses to dwellings (Altman and Werner, 1985; Redfoot, 1984). These researchers note both the importance of the subjective aspects of housing and the problems of its use for policy purposes.

Research Gaps

Clearly there are significant contributions in this research on aging and housing; however, our review identified several aspects of elderly housing that are overlooked or given insufficient attention. For example, the general topic of activities related to housing is neglected. We agree with Newman's (1986) assessment that we do not know what people do in order to maintain their dwellings and we have very little information on strategies for independent living and the types of assistance they seek. Prior emphases on attitudes, geographic units, and housing structures have resulted in an omission of elderly people as active creators and maintainers of their environments. Consequently, a number of researchers in the field of elderly housing have expressed the need for new methodologies and in-depth behavioral studies (Montgomery, Stubbs, and Day, 1980; Bardo and Lamb, 1980; Streib, 1983).

Various social relations and social agents which embody the housing enterprise are

either omitted or not analyzed with respect to their interrelationships in social gerontological writings. As noted by Ball (1983), the provision of housing is more than the relationship between government and consumer households. Analysis of the processes of sheltering involves concentrating on the interrelationship of various social agents associated with housing. These agents include consumers, financial institutions, the construction industry, landowners, etc. We propose that in the few instances in which these agents are examined, they are treated as separate entities and the primary importance of the social agent under investigation is assumed.

Similarly, the institutional aspects of elderly housing have thus far been slighted. Conceptualizing housing as a social institution is commonly passed over. The view of housing as a social institution is quite different from the typical perspectives of housing as a commodity or an industry. As an institution, housing has social determinates, is related to the ruling structures of society, is organized in a manner which is evident in the discourse on elderly housing and coordinated through ideology, and embodies a complex of social relations organized around the function of sheltering.

Studies of housing policy neglect considerations of housing from the standpoint of the elderly. Instead, the majority reflects an administrative and managerial perspective. Current housing-assessment studies rely on abstract concepts such as expressed need, satisfaction, adequacy, etc. This approach ignores elderly people's housing experience and disregards the linkages between housing situations and characteristics of the larger society (Smith, 1979). Even critics conclude that federal programs may be ineffectual because researchers have asked the "wrong persons the wrong questions" (Montgomery, Stubbs, and Day, 1980, p. 451) and because many elderly fall through the cracks in federal programs for these same reasons (Bardo and Lamb, 1980).

Finally, the literature and research on elderly housing lacks a unifying perspective to synthesize previous research and highlight empirical anomalies. As Bardo and Lamb (1980) note ". . . there tends to be a gap in the empirical literature at the interface between social and social-psychological adjustment studies and those of macro-level demographic and ecological trends" (p. 7). Although there are some attempts to bridge the gap, most writings are either theoretical treatises or empirical research limited by available data. There is a noted tendency for researchers to focus on narrow "needs" and "problems" rather than to engage in systematic theorizing or to integrate the research into the mainstream of social scientific disciplines (Fennell, Phillipson, and Evers, 1988).

Methodology

A Feminist-Materialist Orientation

Beginning in the 1970s, Smith (1979) began developing a feminist-materialist methodology which she terms a "sociology for women." Smith's sociology for women attempts to create a knowledge ". . . which explicates the social determinations of our own lives and experience as women" (Smith, no date, p. 3) and, in doing so, she challenges the basic assumptions of much social and scientific research (Acker, Barry, and Esseveld, 1983; Smith, 1981a, 1981b, 1987, 1989a, 1989b). This evolving methodology recognizes that the conceptual frameworks of the social sciences are developed primarily by men and that the experiences of women are largely outside these theoretical structures. Smith's sociology for women is labelled feminist because it seeks to understand the ways in which social relations, institutions, and processes are gender-oriented; the inequalities associated with gender relations; and the socio-cultural and historical forces that produce and reproduce these relations (Chafetz, 1988). The methodology proposed by Smith is a strategy for developing an understanding of these social phenomena.

Smith's critique of the conceptual frameworks of the social sciences in general is applicable to the frameworks used to analyze elderly housing. Although the majority of older people are female and most elderly women live alone sometime in their lives, the everyday world of elderly women living alone is hidden by the very perspectives which purport to provide us with an objective understanding of their housing situation. Thus,

the application of this feminist-materialist methodology is especially appropriate for the study of housing in later life.

Although Smith's feminist-materialist methodology has yet to appear in the literature on housing or on elderly women who live alone, it has been used over the years to investigate a variety of population groups such as single parents and third-world women, and a variety of topics, such as nursing, nursing-home life, schooling, and immigrants (Devault, 1984; Diamond, 1984, 1986; Griffith, 1986; Griffith and Smith, 1985; Mueller, 1988; Ng, 1986). In order to clarify this research orientation, we will briefly summarize some aspects of Diamond's (1986) study of everyday life in nursing homes.

Diamond reports that for approximately two years he worked as a nursing assistant in order to have the direct experience of working in nursing homes and to get to know other nursing assistants and their patients. The use of participant observation in research is not unique to feminist-materialist methodology; however, analytically this research differs from other ethnographic research. Diamond describes the socialization rhetoric of nursing-assistant trainees, that they are being transformed into "health care professionals," and contrasts this emphasis with a nursing assistant's quick realization of the amount of the first minimum wage paycheck--\$209 after two weeks on the job. Two contradictions are immediately apparent: (a) the low salary contradicts the notion of being a professional and (b) the concept of "minimum wage" contradicts with the real economy that is required simply for subsistence.

Diamond (1986) also examines nursing homes from the viewpoint that, as a business, they often view care as a commodity. In the business of caring, "costs, beds, profit margins, costs-accountability, turnover, bottom lines" (p. 1292) become important considerations. Thus, it is logical that third-world nurses often staff U.S. nursing homes, regardless of language and cultural barriers. Additionally, everyday human interaction between staff and patients is transformed into units of service because the logic of capitalism demands that caring be reimbursable. Accounting demands that the work of caring be quantified and, in the process of charting these tasks, much of the reality of patients' lives and caring activity becomes invisible.

The contradictions and tensions described in the research are not derived from the researcher's *a priori* conceptions; rather, they are problems and perspectives voiced by patients, staff, and administrators as their lives are transformed by the medical-capitalist discourse. The feminist-materialist approach in this research gives voice to patients and staff and develops a critique of policies and practices from their viewpoint. The result is not a traditional case study of a nursing home. Instead we are shown how extra-local political, economic, and social practices shape everyday experience locally.

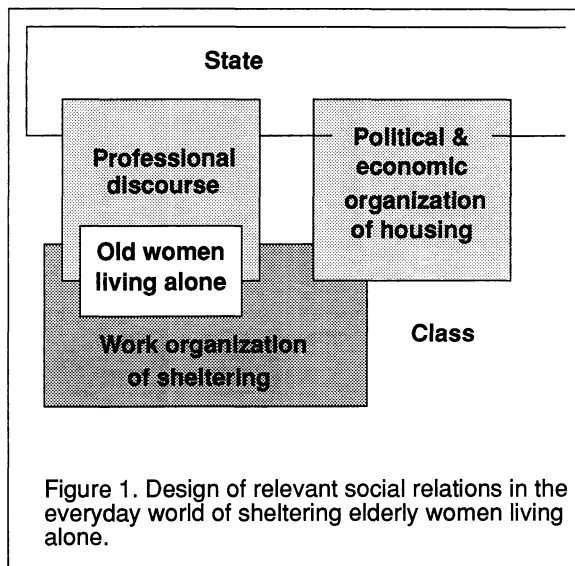
Experiential activities. The problem addressed by Smith (1986) is how local lives and local settings are tied to national and international social, economic, and political processes. The feminist-materialist method is grounded in the activities of people and the conditions produced by those activities. As a method, it attempts to explicate the social determinants of experience in terms of everyday, concrete activity and the social structure around which social life is organized. In Smith's schema the notion of "work," the activities people do to produce their everyday world, forms the linchpin between the everyday experiences of people and larger institutional processes.

Institutions embody a complex set of social relations which include the state, managerial, and administrative processes, plus the professions, academic disciplines, and their coordinating ideology. Although institutions are organized around specific functions, such as sheltering, they do not form a determinant mode of organization. Instead, such institutions serve to connect and coordinate the complex of social relations forming what she calls "the ruling apparatus." In modern societies ruling is removed from local settings; yet, it pervades these settings through abstract textual discourse. It is the textual discourse of academic disciplines, the professions, policy makers, and others that is the expression of the institutional organizational practice with regard to people's everyday worlds.

Institutional Ethnography

Smith's research strategy, which she refers to as "institutional ethnography," involves three procedures: (a) an analysis of institutional ideology as it is presented in textually mediated discourse; (b) an examination of the work that people do to produce their everyday world as it relates to the organization of that world and specific institutional processes; and (c) an examination of the institution and its work which is dependent on the activities of women in relation to the institution.

Figure 1 illustrates the relevant social relations which the researcher explores in an institutional ethnography of elderly women and housing. The diagram is not a theoretical model; rather, it is an attempt to delimit a field of investigation and to illustrate the pervasiveness of discourse at various levels of organization. In addition, the open-ended outline is an aid in helping us extend the analysis from the local situation to larger political economy.



Elderly women living alone is central to the diagram since, as a category, it organizes women's relationship to the housing enterprise. The term provides for the housing enterprise an understanding, and a method for understanding, the "problems" which women experience. Additionally, it provides for women a rudimentary procedure for understanding their own activities.

The women's work of sheltering involves the coordinating of interpersonal relations because other people are also bound by various commitments. Such coordination necessitates specific and actual material (doing) and emotional (feeling) aspects of work processes. The work is consequential for the actor, others involved with the work process, and the housing institution. How the work of women in sheltering is understood and performed conditions the work of others locally active in housing. In turn, the work of the housing enterprise conditions the sheltering activities of women.

Once the work activities and organization have been discovered it is necessary to examine how they are embedded in extra-local social and economic relations. Since work processes are anchored in material conditions, attention must be directed to various class contexts and to the social organization of class. Also significant is the professional discourse which makes the organization of housing and of class accountable.

This discourse provides the medium through which these two social spheres are related ideologically. In the diagram the residence is distinguished as a “work organization” in which the actors work with material, cognitive, economic, and legal constraints. Naturally, the state is involved at many levels through zoning and banking laws, tax policies, construction regulation, housing policies, etc.

Employing Smith’s methodology leads us to address the following analytical questions in relation to the category “elderly women living alone.” How, in the words of women, is housing referred to? Do they refer to it as something other than “work” in the conventional sense? How do they describe their activities? How do their descriptions reveal their activities in connection with other housing agents? What kinds of time, effort, and skill are required in maintaining housing? How are housing problems recognized? What is the vocabulary that is used to describe housing maintenance? What are the principle processes around sheltering? What kind of planning, preparing, managing, and monitoring work is involved?

Alternative research. The utility of Smith’s approach in addressing the discontinuities in previous research lies in redefining elderly housing in terms of the complex of social relations involved in the institution of housing. First, as noted previously, the activities of people are neglected. However, feminist-materialism involves acting, conscious individuals from the very beginning; therefore, the materialist method is grounded in the activities of people and not in the conceptual frameworks of social gerontology and housing literature. Attention is given to the discovery of these everyday activities and exploring with the women the work they do in regard to sheltering.

Secondly, feminist-materialism explicates the social relations and social agents actively involved with housing. Investigation begins with the experiences of older women living alone and traces how their activities are connected to other agents in the housing enterprise. These agents are important intermediaries which connect the household to the large society and, therefore, determine the activities of elderly women engaged in sheltering. While this approach may not produce a comprehensive account of all housing agents, it will explicate the relationships significant to the subjects being investigated.

Thirdly, feminist-materialism treats housing as a social institution of which “elderly women living alone” is but a segment. The feminist-materialist treatment of housing as an institution leads to the view of elderly women embedded in a world of realtors, landlords/ladies, building managers, mortgage institutions, housing developers, contractors, subcontractors, building workers, architects, repairers, the state, gerontologists, urban planners, housekeepers, home health aides, etc. The experiences of elderly women with regard to the activities of maintaining their housing situations are organized and given their character by these relations.

Fourthly, the managerial/administrative perspective which dominates the housing discourse becomes a part of the investigation under feminist-materialism. Smith’s framework views the concepts and categories of institutional ideologies, including housing ideologies, as expressions relating individuals’ actions to the institution’s functions. Institutional ideologies, as they are found in the discourse, commonly substitute concepts and categories for real work processes and, in doing so, the work process is hidden. The use of Smith’s framework allows for a critical examination of housing ideology—the terminology and understandings used in the housing industry which revolve around the everyday practical considerations of managers and administrators—and the invisible work process of older women living alone. It begins with elderly women living alone as knowers and actors and from that perspective the social relations and objectified knowledge are made problematic (Smith, 1989b).

The lack of integration between micro- and macro-level research is also addressed with feminist-materialism. Quite simply, the manner in which everyday experience is viewed as problematic necessitates the determination of how local courses of action have reference to and are dependent upon the organization of national and international

social, economic, and political processes. The everyday experiences of older women living alone with respect to housing are explicated by exploring the social relations that shape women's experience.

Research findings concerned with elderly women living alone direct researchers to different sorts of complex and interrelated questions. What is the material work necessary for physical maintenance? What are the local organizing principles directing these activities? How do activities surrounding sheltering connect the household member with the larger society, particularly those agents involved in the provision of housing? And more specifically, how are these issues viewed from the standpoint of elderly women living alone?

Questions related to the discourse of housing are also important. Whose perspective is being presented in the text? Who are the producers of knowledge? What descriptive categories or conceptual structure is used to present the phenomenon? Is an interpretive scheme used explicitly or implicitly to organize the facts? What rules are used in "working up" the phenomenon or in representing the facts? What background knowledge is taken for granted by the knowers that enable them to determine what is observable, how it is observed, and what is relevant to the proper structuring of the observations?

Discussion

We have argued that a feminist methodology is needed in the area of housing since the majority of people 65 years and over are women. Furthermore, the conceptual frameworks used to examine housing--research which is both historically and presently dominated by men and the interest of men--are inappropriate for the task of explicating the everyday life of elderly women living alone. Since Smith both critiques current methodology and redirects us to a new alternative, her feminist methodology is a major contribution at a time when there is a demand for social science to incorporate the experience of women.

The feminist-materialist methodology departs from quantitative social scientific approaches that rely on the disciplines' conceptual apparatus; as we have noted, feminist-materialist research begins from the standpoint of the knowing subject. Its aim is to develop knowledge from the "inside." Nevertheless, it also departs from time-honored, qualitative research approaches such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and descriptive ethnography (Geertz, 1973). Generally, these qualitative methodologies, like the quantitative methodologies, transform the subjects into objects of research, and active agency is attributed to social scientific concepts rather than to acting individuals. Furthermore, qualitative case studies fail to relate local lives to the remote, yet penetrating, ruling apparatus because the researchers investigate too narrow a field.

Similarly feminist-materialism differs from contemporary political economy. As Smith (1989a) argues, the institutionalized discourse of political economy has its own logic, categories, and relevances. In this discourse, class and gender are certainly objects to be investigated, but they stand as external phenomenon. Furthermore, topics which are central to feminism are marginal in the research agenda of political economy. Political economy concerns itself with the institutions of ruling, an arena in which women have been marginalized. Smith's feminist-materialism promotes a change in standpoint from that of the ruling apparatus to that of women and how everyday life is experienced by women. This brings new actors, new topics, and new struggles into the picture.

Feminist-materialism allows us to examine social relations from various points of view beginning with the experiences of elderly women living alone. It requires that we take this vantage point because the structure of the political economy conceals the work processes of others by administrative, managerial, and professional discourse. This approach, for example, permits a viewpoint that is uncluttered by capitalist social relations in which the work processes may be transformed and abstracted into commodities for economic profit. Significantly, this view provides us with a different understanding of

housing policy because it enables us to examine housing policy as it is lived. It provides us with the opportunity to create a base of knowledge for policy formation which is congruent with elderly women's everyday lives. Elderly women living alone are not simply an at-risk population with special problems, an abstraction in the textual discourse of housing. Rather, they are real people, acting in actual and specific situations, producing and reproducing the invisible work processes which make possible the housing enterprise.

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Luken and Vaughan

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Luken and Vaughan

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