

Environmental Press of “Empty” Space and Visibility of the Null among Older Persons:
Consequences for Health and Well-being

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This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in Ireland in 2007-2008 as part of the TRIL program (Technology Research for Independent Living), that involved three universities, St. James Hospital in Dublin, and the INTEL Corporation. The project was invested in exploring viable technologies that could help support older persons' independence within their communities. As researchers involved in conducting ethnographies of the lives of persons in their homes and communities to understand some of the challenges they face and ways in which technologies might help, we were struck with the varying levels of difficulties and stress people experienced in navigating their lives in an increasingly complex urban environment. We were also struck by the experience of emptiness by several persons who otherwise appeared to be managing well.

In working with other ethnographers, we pulled our data about the environmental challenges imposed by macro-structural changes (e.g., population increase, congested traffic, a stressed health care system, economic pressures to move or remodel), as well as ongoing challenges in navigating their domestic environments (in light of the physical and cognitive impairments imposed by aging) in light of available social and structural supports and resources. In particular, we attempted to understand various kinds of stress experienced by older people maneuvering new, changed, or even apparently unchanged environments, and what aspects of those environments and/ or the person's relations to them led the person to experience elevated stress, alarm, or risk. This led

us to consider the extent to which the “visibility” or” invisibility of environments impose risk, or conversely reduce risk by allowing for their seamless navigation. In the process of elaborating our ideas, we turned to the Environmental Press model, an enduring model in aging research, to help us examine these issues.

Our paper will examine the situation of one Irish elder who had been functioning well in the community, but who during one evening was overcome with a profound sense of emptiness. For him, the environment became unusually “visible” or “pressing.” The emptiness was an expression of something beyond the boundaries of a physical environment. The Environmental Press model provided a useful starting point for trying to understand his experience, but it was limited in its ability to penetrate the deeper relational resonances of his environment, and it was unhelpful, or even paradoxical, in explaining the experience of emptiness. More useful was the literature on place identity, place attachment and the phenomenology of emptiness and emotion.

In this paper, we will briefly describe the environmental Press/Competence model and some of its limitations, and then move on to discussing the experience of this man. As Peace and colleagues suggest, environmental press may be important because, through it, people become aware of their environment (2006:12-13), and perhaps aware that something is amiss (cf. Hazell 1984:975). Becoming aware of the very emergence of emptiness in an apparently “full” life may provide clues for improving the overall health and well being of elders.

Early iterations of the Environmental Press model (Murray 1938; Lawton and Simon 1968) emphasized the impact of the environment on the individual. The less competent an individual was cognitively and physically, the more that individual’s behavior depended on features of the environment (the environment docility model). In response to critiques that the model overemphasized the demands, or press from the environment, while depicting persons as passively responding to it, later iterations of the

classic Press/Competence formulation, sometimes called the Ecological Theory of Aging, or the ETA Lawton and Nahemow 1973; Lawton 1986), and later, the Person-Environment model (Schwarz 2003:15), provided a more balanced view depicting an interactive relationship between the person and the environment. According to this view, a person's ability to handle, or adapt to the demand or press imposed by the environment, varies dynamically with changes in each person's competence and perception of the press (Lawton 1986:17). The dynamic changes in both press and competency that occur with aging result in fluid patterns of adaptation (Sartariano 2006:43). On a two dimensional scale, where competence moves from low to high on one axis, and environmental press from weak to strong on the other axis, the line moving between the axes represents adaptation. Positive adaptive behavior occurs between a zone of maximum comfort, in which environmental stress is low, *but not too low* or inadequate, and a zone of maximum performance potential, where high levels of environmental press forces a person to perform at her highest capacity, without creating excessive stress that can extend beyond a person's ability to handle it. Within these bands of "adaptive" functioning, a balance is achieved between a person's competence and environmental press which enables the person to "tune out" the environment (Peace et al. 2005:190). At the extremes of these zones are what the authors call maladaptation, resulting either from an underloading of stimuli that leads to boredom or passivity on one hand or excessive stimulation on the other, that is beyond one's capacity to handle.

Despite the research this model has inspired, the Competence/ Press interaction it describes is limited to functioning in an objective physical environment (Lawton 1986:16). Thus the impact of environmental press as related to emotions, associations and subjective meanings (Scheidt & N-B 2003:41; Peace et al. 188-9) has been inadequately theorized. Similarly, the model tends to theorize the environment as a

passive, inert container, rather than one that is transformed by those that inhabit it over time (cf. Casey 1996:24-25). And while environmental press could be conceptualized to include the macro level challenges involving social and political economic realities, these have typically been ignored by the model. Let's move on to the case study.

Case Study 1: Bob Bradley

Bob Bradley is a 77-year-old man who has resided for the last 50 years in a large semi-detached house in a comfortable middle class neighborhood in a northern suburb of Dublin. Fifteen years ago he retired from a position in the Postal Service and from his private upholstery business. He had lived with "the love of his life" until about 4 years earlier when her dementia became far too difficult to manage alone at home. He wanted to keep her home, and even built in a separate kitchen, adjacent to the regular kitchen, to be used exclusively by her caregiver. The kitchen went unused, as his wife declined very quickly in the last six years and could no longer swallow or hold up her head, and would have needed a team of caregivers to watch her at home. Sadly, he agreed to move her to a lovely nearby nursing home, where he visited her daily. When her condition further deteriorated, she moved into the more specialized nursing term care unit at St. James Hospital, which was at least thirty minutes away by car, depending on traffic. He visited her now on Wednesday evenings and on Sundays.

He and his wife had been the best of friends and would go places together; as a result they never cultivated independent friendships, and he never frequented pubs so did not even have companions there. As a couple they did get together frequently with another couple, but after his wife left the house, he rarely got together with them. He did spend time with John, his brother-in-law, after John became widowed, and they did a lot of traveling together, but John remarried a woman who is very possessive of his time, and now Bob rarely sees him. The apparent time alone, however, was not a problem as

he described himself as a “loner” who enjoys his independence and spending time in his garden, working on his family’s genealogy, antiquing and refinishing select finds.

Still, Bob has almost daily contact with his five children and many grandchildren, and his home serves as the anchor point for dropping off and picking up the children from school and events, and he is often the driver and babysitter. In fact on the day of my visit, he had contact with a full twelve family members and eight grandchildren came to his house after school before being picked. He took clear pleasure in the social contact and activity, but the nature of the contact was largely instrumental, as there was little actual time spent in relaxed conversation, and the grandchildren were swept off as soon as their parents arrived.

I arrived at Bob’s house late in the morning and did not leave until 10:00 that night. When I arrived he was sitting in the living room reading a book, but invited me to sit in his special parlor, reserved for guests, where he kept his genealogy records and his finest antiques, most of which he refinished himself. Here we spent a large part of the day, chatting, in the midst of children being dropped off and an occasional drive of a grandchild to a class. The children stayed in the kitchen, living room or small computer room, but were not allowed in the special parlor.

After the last of his family left, it seemed as if the day had suddenly turned dark, and I was struck by a profound sense of emptiness. I recalled Crapanzano’s description of the change he sensed of brightness of light in his office when the mood of one of his student’s shifted from dark to relieved (2007:70). The emptiness I felt with Bob in part reflected the time of day, when all the family had literally “emptied out,” but as Crapanzano described, had there was clearly something more, reflecting Bob’s mood. Bob and I had just moved into the kitchen, and he began talking about his wife -- a painful subject he had avoided earlier on in the day, in the midst of activity, and when he was feeling more jovial. Now, in the quiet of the evening, with the activities ended, he

was free to reminisce in an open-ended way that allowed him to think back to his wife and feelings of loss for her.

Bob became tearful as he spoke of the considerable time he and his wife had spent together and how very much in love they were. Profound loneliness overcame him in spite of all the activity earlier in the day. Although their physical separation was approaching four years, Bob's deep love and loss of her companionship endured, even if it was backgrounded for a time in the flurry of family activities or the distraction of hobbies. I wondered if it was the time of day, when, as with Crapanzano, a distinct darkening occurred -- a softer, quieter environment in which one could be alone with one's feelings -- that allowed the emptiness to surface. Indeed, as Rubinstein and Madeiros observe, a focus on internal affairs increases when contact with the outside world diminishes (2005:54), and internal awareness is a ripe condition for experiencing emptiness (Hazell 1984:967). It is then that backgrounded memories, feelings, attachments, and emotions are exposed.

To psychoanalysts the *internal* experience of emptiness is quite distinct from *external* void. Void is a "deadness," and absence of emotion, a cognitive and behavioral paralysis stripped of meaning (Ratcliffe 2008:227-228). In contrast, emptiness may be expressed as need (Charles 2000:119; Ratcliffe 2008:229), as recognition of absence, a lack of satedness that once was, or a sense that part of the self is missing (Hazell 1984: 967). Emptiness, or rather the awareness of emptiness, is in contrast to void, is filled with emotion and meaning (Ratcliffe 2008:229). Why else would it bring someone to tears?

The feeling of emptiness derives from disruptions in object relations (Charles 2000:121; Hazell 1984:967; Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2005), or attachments of persons to objects, other persons, and/ or places. The loss of attachments typically results in a stressful period of disruption, then coping with the losses and creating new

attachments (Brown and Perkins 1992:279). Bob, a self-pronounced loner who enjoyed his independence, was not about to create new attachments, although he preserved those with family, and to a lesser extent, friends. But these family attachments, as fleeting as they were in the busy lives of his children, could never replace the attachment to his wife.

No doubt the kitchen, where Bob regularly prepared and drank tea, was a place where he and his wife spent considerable time over nearly half a century. The special parlor that housed his antiques and projects were strictly his, and the living room was rarely used. The kitchen, which was bright and pleasant during the day and overlooked his well-kept flower garden, served as the principal “living” center (Oswald and Wahl 2005:25) for himself with his wife over their near half century there. To this living center as significant domestic space were attached fond memories of people, objects, events and times shared, both memorable and taken for granted. Objects, like teacups, within places reflect identities of those who long used them, and provide visual reminders of their absence (Peace et al. 2005; Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2005:47). As Riley argues, “time, landscape and people are inextricably entangled” (1992:20).

Attachment to place emerges in living centers like kitchens where (Riley 1992:20) memories are deeply held. It is the absorption of the person (and significant others, times, events and memories) by the environment that renders it so significant, indeed poignant, for persons. Whenever a person allows him/ herself to reflect on what the environment holds in memory -- but no longer holds in substance (including other persons) -- that the loss and emptiness can be felt. This is why Riley calls the “imagined landscape”, that may retain a significant other who no longer occupies it, “has more meaning, power and importance in the role of the human experience than the landscape experienced concretely” (1992:20) in the present. He asks, in fact, whether the greater power of place lies, “not in inhabiting” a place, “but in remembering it?” (1992:20). This

may be why apparently minor stimuli, like the smell of tea or coffee, may spark emotional responses and complex associations with a particular place (1992:21). For older adults who have lived for many years within the same home, cognitive connections and the emotional sense of belonging have biographical roots in select spaces and things (Oswald and Wahl 2005:30).

There is a temporal dimension as well that stirs awareness, that renders one conscious of attachment to place and all that means for a person. This temporal dimension makes us aware of that which has transpired, and been lost with time. According to the Environmental Press model, press of an environment decreases, that is, becomes invisible or ignored, the longer one is associated with it (Nahemow 2000:25). In contrast, the notion of place attachment suggests that the very length of this association provides a rootedness (Tuan 1974) or what Relph coined as “existential insidedness” (1975) that makes a familiar environment so compelling, and at times, overwhelming (Brown and Perkins 1992:282). For as Riley so astutely notes, “ordinary landscapes can also be powerful through their oppressiveness” (Riley 1992: 20); that is, roots can also be bonds.

According to the Environmental Press model, when a purported balance is achieved between environmental stimuli and the person, the environment is invisible, or beyond awareness. When environmental press is reduced (Lawton and Nahemow 1973:661), however, the environment becomes visible again (Lawton 1986:13). This may be when people become aware of the nagging sense of loss and emptiness. But occurs. However, as Press et al. 2005 note, press occurs not only at the functional and operational level, but also at the emotional experiential level. Thus environments that become seen as pressing or even oppressive, may be so not at an operational level of navigation, but at an emotional experiential level. We are not talking about adaptation and competence in navigating one’s immediate world; we are talking about the aching

memories (*a different kind of press*) of intersubjective losses that periodically may erupt. Indeed conditions under which these memories or other pressures stir the imagination may vary widely and be totally unrelated to either competence or adaptation.

As the dialectical biologists, like Lewontin, have long argued, organisms do not merely adapt to their environments; they construct them (Ratcliffe 2008:222). Similarly Feld's well-known words, "We are not only *in* places, but *of* them" (Casey 1996:19), resound the ineluctable intersubjectivity that bounds humans as meaning-makers to place. This is seen in our ability to tune in, and out, environments, as it is in our choice to suspend our awareness of our feeling of emptiness as we choose to resume the taken-for-granted business of things.

For the Environmental Press model, adaptation is optimal where the environment can be backgrounded, tuned out, rendered effectively invisible; within that range, people are said to function most competently. For Bob, these would be the times when he is most busy or distracted, when his attention is consumed by his interest in projects or the needs of his family. These are the times when he can get on with his life and not be consumed by the sadness attached to memories of his losses. The most adaptive period, by this model, would be where environmental stressors are absent, providing neither an awareness of overstimulation or understimulation. Although the Environmental Press model emphasizes functioning within environments as vital to independent living, the meaning an environment holds for an older person and the symbolic constructions and affective associations attached to space have equally significant experiential consequences for well-being. It is during lacunae in adaptation, when backgrounded feelings surface, that we are afforded glimpses of locations fraught with feeling. It is during these periods, when balance is not achieved, periods seen as maladaptive by the classic Person-Environment model, when we become attuned again to feelings associated with deepest meaning in our life. During these times, the depth of

feelings attached to place may remind us of the significance of what we have lost; it also provides the source of continued meaning (cf. Ratcliffe 2008:229).

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