

Distance, Equity and Older People's Experiences in the Nordic Periphery

Centering the Local

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Chapter 4

**Age-friendly environments in the stories
of older people in the Finnish Arctic**

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4 Age-friendly environments in the stories of older people in the Finnish Arctic

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Introduction

Objectives, background and research focus

In this chapter, I use the concept of distance to assess what an age-friendly environment (AFE) comprises in the view of different groups of older people in the Finnish North. Age-friendliness is connected to the impact of context on people's overall well-being (Nieboer and Cramm, 2022). The focal questions are: What elements do older people cite as important for their daily life in relation to an AFE; are there problems and challenges that create distances among that population or between that population and something else; and do these problems and challenges differ by group (native Finns, immigrants and Sámi)?

Finland is the fastest ageing society (Pirhonen et al., 2020) and most sparsely populated country in Europe (Valkama and Oulasvirta, 2021). In this study, the terms “Finnish North” and “Finnish Lapland” refer to the Arctic part of Finland, which exhibits many of the distinct features associated with the North (Bærenholdt, 2007; Berger, 2010). It is geographically distant from the capital city; demographically diverse; sparsely populated, with small and remote communities; and marked by harsh climatic conditions.

Much research has emphasized the importance of an environment which is supportive for members of the older population (Phillips et al., 2005, pp. 147–163). Older people's living environment plays a significant role in ensuring their quality of life and maintaining their overall well-being. Some scholars have adopted a distinct geographical perspective that includes the specific experiences of growing old in the North (Skinner and Hanlon, 2017). Out-migration, in-migration and limited access to resources have given rise to a variety of problems affecting older people in particular (Begum, 2019; Wennberg, 2019). For example, out-migration of young people (especially women) poses a risk to the availability of care for older people. Living in a sparsely populated area, far from the centers, in communities with tenuous service infrastructures are all circumstances that have a negative influence on the lives of older people (Keating, 2008, p. 122). Moreover, long distances reduce opportunities for intergenerational care, which affects the lives of older people in rural and peripheral communities (Aure, 2019, pp. 141–155). On the other hand, in

many studies, rural communities have been shown to be protected by distance from pollution, crowding and crime (Shucksmith and Brown, 2016).

The first section presents the objectives of the study as well as background on the research focus. The second section takes up the theoretical framework informing the research, specifically the concepts of an AFE and distance and how they are interconnected. The third section describe the data collection processes and ethical guidelines followed. The fourth section then provides an analysis of my data and discusses the three clusters of AFEs – the natural, built and social environments (Eales et al., 2008) – in relation to distance. The fifth section concludes, discussing the needs and expectations cited by the informants regarding their living environments, as well as the distances that shape their lives.

Conceptualizing age-friendly environments

In Europe and elsewhere, service providers and policymakers have recently been emphasizing the need to create and maintain age-friendly communities (Lui et al., 2009, p. 116; QR, 2020; Nieboer and Cramm, 2022; THL, 2022), an aim driven by the political idea of ageing in place and programs to that end. An AFE is a way to ensure the rights of older people to a better life. AFEs promote health and well-being in different settings (European Commission, 2009; Leis and Gijssbers, 2011; OECD, 2014) and increase people’s participation as they age (SHAFE, 2017–2022; IFA, 2022).

These considerations derive from the indicators identified by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007) in the eight domains which it has proposed as central to understanding an AFE: housing, transportation, urban spaces and the built environment, social participation, civic participation and employment, respect and social inclusion, access to community support and health services, and communication and information. However, these domains are applicable mainly to older people living in urban settings. For example, the WHO’s definition of an AFE does not consider all circumstances of the rural North, including the diversity of the population there.

The creation of an AFE is a “person-environment fit”, that is, a balance among older people’s distinct needs and resources (educational level, ethnicity), physio-environmental conditions (outdoor spaces and buildings, housing, transportation, community support, local shops and health services) and socio-environmental conditions (social and civic participation, respect, social approval) (Menec et al., 2011; Keating et al., 2013). Older people are becoming more dependent on their surrounding resources (Lawton, 1977; Iecovich, 2014; Cramm et al., 2016). Lawton (1977) has emphasized the importance in older people’s living environment of “the resources available ... within accessible distance, whether they be life sustaining facilities such as shops, medical care and police protection, or life enriching facilities, such as family, friends, cultural opportunities or a senior centre”. Lawton’s list incorporates most of the aspects of the natural, built and social urban environment, but only on a general level. The present study seeks a more nuanced account of the features older Finns, immigrants and Sámi consider salient in creating an AFE and their experiences of their present circumstances.

Many older people in the Nordic Arctic enjoy an age-friendly community such as that described in Eales et al. (2008, p. 113) for rural Canada; that is, “their surroundings are clean and quiet and it is a naturally beautiful community”. Such an environment resonates strongly among residents of the Finnish Arctic. Significantly, the situation in northern rural settings varies considerably (Eales et al., 2008, p. 110). It differs noticeably based on the amount of social support available for older people in their particular context. For example, there has been discussion that certain areas would receive lower standard services (Bronstein et al., 2006) and less access to private and public services (Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher, 2004). In areas where there might be less access to services, older people with better financial resource could still enjoy their environment to the full.

The concept of distance has several connections to the concept of an AFE. For example, positive social environments allow older people to maintain relationships with family members, friends and neighbors (Smith et al., 2013; Del Barrio et al., 2021). Distance, by definition, suggests separation of people or of people and resources and conceptually captures the range of obstacles to developing AFEs (Elmannai and Elleithy, 2017). Yet, as detailed below, distance may also be positive, such as when it affords protection from unwelcome elements of an environment.

Finnish ageing policy and politics have seen increasing discussion on and interest in creating more environments that are more age-friendly. For example, the Ministry of the Environment is running cross-sectoral action programs in municipalities and well-being service counties (ME, 2020–2022) and has issued a report on the quality and safety of housing for older people (ME, 2021). For its part, the Ministry of the Interior (MI, 2020) has published a report describing the operating environment, service availability and safety and security situation in sparsely populated areas. In another contribution, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (QR, 2020, p. 3) have issued quality recommendations that aim “to guarantee a good quality of life and effective high-quality services for all older persons who need them”. The anticipated actions will lay the basis for AFEs. Some of the ongoing changes in the political steering and operating environment have been considered in formulating the questionnaire used in the present study. This yielded a sharper focus on the importance of revealing problems and challenges that create social, geographical, economic and emotional distances among different groups of older people in trying to create an AFE. This nuanced notion of distance is germane in the present setting, where geography and ethnicity figure significantly.

An AFE can be defined as an environment that empowers older persons to live independently (even if they have many needs for care), to stay active (those who want to be active) for a longer period and to live safely and securely. Creating an AFE requires a successful combination of the elements in the three environmental clusters put forward by Eales et al. (2008): the natural environment (e.g., healthy natural surroundings); the human-built (e.g., infrastructures, necessary support services, healthcare services); and the social (e.g., opportunities to maintain social relationships with family, friends, relatives and neighbors; a space where they may enjoy proper respect regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity or country of origin).

Distance figures here in determining access to community support and health care; where these are distant, older people cannot enjoy an inclusive AFE. It is important to identify the issues and resources where older people reside and which they interact with and depend on (Wahl and Weisman, 2003). A recent study notes that “older people living in less age-friendly communities have particular difficulty in optimizing the achievement of the instrumental goals of behavioral confirmation, comfort, and affection, as well as overall well-being” (Nieboer and Cramm, 2018).

The desirable content of an AFE may differ for different groups of older people (Kahana et al., 2003). For example, in some villages in the Finnish North, out-migration and the consequent reduction in public transportation and funding for community activities have created physical, social, cultural and emotional distances among those who would like to be active (Begum, 2019).

Research data, selection of participants and methods

Data collection and selection of participants

The data were collected in two series of interviews. In the first, in 2017, I interviewed 19 older people from a large municipality 280 km north of the city of Rovaniemi, which lies on the Arctic Circle. Some were living in their own homes, and some in a nursing home. In the second series, in the period 2020–2022, I interviewed 22 informants from different areas. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning of 2020 until mid-2021, when stringent restrictions applied to meeting older people, I was able to interview only two native Finns and one older Sámi person face to face, with this requiring that I keep enough physical distance. In summer 2021, when the restrictions eased somewhat and older people had been vaccinated, I interviewed a total of 19 people: 13 native Finns; 4 immigrants, originally from Asia and Europe; and 2 Sámi. I located the native Finns, the Sámi and one immigrant informant through my personal networks. I received the names of the remaining immigrant informants through an organization that works for immigrants.

For the sake of anonymity, I do not use the informants’ real names and do not mention their location or the name of organization referred to above. I received informed consent for this study from participants. I told them that my interest was in hearing about their past and present lives, as well as what their expectations for the future were, what they considered important for a good life and which of these elements were missing in their lives, and what their expectations were regarding AFEs. As the numbers of the informants within different groups were imbalanced, I sought to create a balance by narrowing down the total number of interviews from 41 to 15. I have selected those interviews that highlight the diversity of experiences (Debbie et al., 2012; Victor et al., 2012) regarding AFEs.

Descriptions of informants

The older people for this study comprise three different groups: native Finns, Sámi and immigrants. The immigrants are now living in their second homeland

and some of their family members and relatives live on different continents. The three groups are markedly heterogeneous in terms of ethnic origin and cultural background, with differences lying in individual lives, socio-cultural practices and institutional arrangements (Davis, 2008, p. 68). In the final sample, seven informants are native Finns, four have a Sámi background, and four are immigrants; they are from different rural cities in the northern part of Finland. At the time of the interviews, 14 of the informants were living in their own house or apartment, and one in a nursing home.

Eleven of the interviews were conducted face to face at informants' residences and four by telephone. All interviews were recorded. The interviews were 40 minutes to one and half hours in length, providing insights evoked by particular social situations (Lieblich et al., 1998) into the interviewees' experiences, hopes and expectations. The language used to interview native and Sámi older people was Finnish, but both Finnish and English were used in interviewing immigrants. One older immigrant was interviewed with the help of an interpreter. I use long descriptions in Table 4.1 and in the analysis to give voice (Lyons, 2007).

In this study, seven of the older native Finnish informants were born in the northern part of the country. One was living with his spouse in the area where he was born and brought up. Six other informants were living near the main city of the municipality in houses and apartments, with some having children living in same city. Three of the six needed some kind of help and services at home. Of the four Sámi informants, two were living in the community where they were born, one in an apartment in an urban setting and one in a nursing home. The immigrants are originally from Asia and Europe. Of the four, three were living near service centers, and the fourth near her son's family. The immigrant men needed different kinds of assistance from the institutions where I interviewed them. The immigrant woman receives help from her son and daughter-in-law, who is Finnish.

Table 4.1 Synopsis of informants.

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Age range</i>	<i>Socio-economic position (pension/ social support)</i>	<i>Residence house/ apartment/nursing home</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Total</i>
Sámi	75–78	3 with good, 1 with insufficient pension (informant's opinion)	2 in own house, 1 in apartment, 1 in nursing home	3	1	4
Native Finns	70–92	5 with good, 2 with insufficient pension	4 in own house, 3 in apartments (1 rented)	4	3	7
Immigrants	64–84	2 with good, 1 with insufficient pension; 1 living on social support only	3 in rented apartments, 1 in own house	1	3	4
Total				8	7	15

These interviews are a construct of the past and present and a reflection of the lived present of the informants. The three components of an AFE elaborated in Eales et al. (2008) are more suitable than other analyses in the literature, since these provide a salient basis for analyzing what makes a good AFE in the present context. I carried out a thematic analysis of the informants' past and present experiences of their living environments, concentrating on themes relating to the components of an AFE.

The study has been carried out with due consideration for the ethical requirements of research on older people (Nikander and Zechner, 2006). The main ethical concerns for this study are the informants' age and their Indigenous and immigrant backgrounds. The experience of older immigrants required particular attention (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). Since the languages that the informants used were not my native language, I was careful to remain mindful of the ethical concern that often people who do not speak the language fail to understand cultural nuances and sensitivities (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). The participants understood what they were participating in (Christians, 2000, p. 145). Particular attention is called for in research involving immigrants given "the differences between cultures, cultural values ... and [that] there is no one standard for judging the morality of individuals, groups or cultures" (McDonald, 2010, p. 453).

Exploring distances among different groups of older people

Distances and differences in the natural environment

A broad range of features have been identified in informants' accounts that would characterize AFEs in the Finnish Arctic: clean air, clean water, suitable weather, naturally grown traditional food, materials and resources to clothe oneself, sources of spiritual, cultural inspiration and emotional nourishment and the availability of open space, land, forest and lakes for walking, hunting and fishing.

The importance of fresh and clean surroundings was cited by 83-year-old Heini: "Our city needs to be better organized, to make more locations available where people can bring waste so they do not throw it here and there. The city is becoming dirty".

During the Covid pandemic, summer activities such as spending time in one's own garden, walking in nature and picking berries in the forest were mentioned as excellent activities by all women who were still physically strong at the time. Some of them met with friends outside. Despite slippery conditions, Inari, 73, mentioned, "me and my husband have good studded shoes – they were expensive – that we wear on our regular walk". In contrast, Harun, a 64-year-old immigrant man from a crowded and warm Asian country living on a basic pension, said: "The cold and slippery winter is a barrier to integration with the community". The cold, dark and quiet environment creates feelings of depression among immigrants.

Martta, 77, a nature-lover from the rural North (who has Sámi relatives) stated: "I am happy that our environment is less polluted now that outsiders have not been able to enter this area [during the pandemic]". By "outsider" Martta meant tourists

and noted that not all tourists keep the environment clean. Her comment reflects a distance between local people and outsiders.

Older informants living either in apartments in urban settings or in nursing homes because of physical frailty reminisced about opportunities to enjoy nature, which had been a positive element in their lives. A case in point is 92-year-old Armi, who noted:

My children take me outside whenever possible to feel the fresh air and organize opportunities to spend time in the cottage near nature and the lake, which keeps me healthy.

A similar sentiment was conveyed by older informants from a nursing home in a mixed natural and urban setting. They pointed out how important it is when relatives come to visit and take them outside and when they can attend religious and cultural activities. In this regard, children and relatives work as agents enabling older people to bridge a distance in the environment.

A Finnish native, Jarno, aged 74, lived in the same area where he spent his childhood and built a house near a lake there. He pointed out:

This landscape and lake are a strong bond for me and I spent my childhood here. I have expanded my business here. I met my wife here in the North. She is originally from southern Finland but fell in love with me and with this place.

Nature bridges the distance between Jarno and his wife. In light of the importance of the natural environment to Jarno, the following observation by John Moss (1994, p. 5) is apt: “Landscape is the natural world without the benefit of human consciousness, although not excluding human presence. You may enter landscape, but in humility, if truly there, you cannot tell yourself apart from it”. Informants living in nursing homes stated that they missed traditional foods, music and their native language; nature reminded them of who they were, was part of their way of life and gave them freedom.

Alpo, aged 77, a Sámi informant, was happy that he was living in a green environment. Alpo can be seen as an adherent of the Green Perspective (Torgerson, 1999, p. 186), since he believed that human impacts, such as mining, automotive emissions and deforestation, have degraded the natural environment, destroyed wildlife and caused a lack of reindeer forage. Forest and land for reindeer herding are part of the cultural identity of the Indigenous Sámi (Sellheim, 2022), although few Sámi people are involved in reindeer husbandry today (Lehtola, undated). Indeed, Alpo very emotionally exclaimed that “mining, gold digging - these activities are indeed a threat to Sámi land, cultural identity and reindeer herding and are destroying the environment as a whole”. In the interview, he criticized the Finnish government, saying that: “Lapland now has a mixture of different people and this has destroyed Sáminess”. Here he captures a distance between what used to be and what is and how politics has partly caused that distance.

Shaila, 67, from another crowded and warm Asian country, mentioned that although she needs to wear heavy clothes to adapt to the different weather, she enjoys the freshness in the air and nature. She noted: “I walk and go outside every day for two hours and feel the fresh oxygen. I ride a bicycle, which I could not think of doing in my native country”. Shaila mentioned that northern culture is more open, with people having frequent contacts over long distances, a feature which resonated with her own culture. COVID-19 did not affect her much since she was living in the countryside some distance from the city. She stated that her community “has a small population, fields and forests, a very peaceful, healthy and natural environment, but travelling to my country of origin became expensive”.

Good food, clean and fresh water, air and adequate waste removal systems are important factors for the health of older people in the North (Short, 2006; Eales et al., 2008; Begum, 2019). These constitute the crucial resource base for life (Bubolz and Sontag, 1993), in northern Finland as elsewhere. There were similarities and differences in the comments of native Finns, immigrants and Sámi about the natural environment of the Finnish North. In the case of similarities, connections with the place are very important for many older people (Sheila, 2022), for example, through the natural landscape, a garden and opportunities to walk in the forest. Regarding differences, although all groups emphasized the importance of living in a peaceful and healthy environment, immigrant informants said they preferred to live in urban settings.

From the above discussion, it can be said that the natural environment plays an important role for older people, especially for older native Finns and Sámi. For some older immigrants, the environment imposes hardships – the long winter and cold weather. This creates a distance of sorts preventing their being as active as they would like to be. Different socio-cultural backgrounds may result in positive distances for some – proximity of nature – and negative distances for others – winter as an obstacle.

Distances and differences in the human-built environment

Among the interviewees, the native Finns and Sámi in particular emphasized familiar, peaceful surroundings. For some older people, having a cottage in addition to a house or apartment plays an important role in their life; both locations are considered “home”. Ideally, the cottage should be within easily driving distance. A rural community is age-friendly if it offers familiar surroundings and security (Eales et al., 2008, p. 116). Safety and security are also important considerations for those who live in nursing homes.

The implementation of an “ageing in place” strategy depends on the availability of resources in the human-built environment (Chau and Jamei, 2021). Although this strategy is emphasized in the Finnish Arctic (QR, 2020; ME, 2021), it has not been possible to implement and maintain for numerous reasons. For example, many older people who were living in their own homes and were financially secure have had to leave their homes or move from home to an apartment house due to

their frail physical condition. In one such instance, Armi, 92, who was living in an urban setting, noted:

After 2007, it was very difficult to keep up with the work in the yard, though I could handle the housework. Since my children (oldest daughter and son) live in the same city, I have sold my home and bought an apartment in the city center. There I can manage. ... I have a high commode in the toilet and enough space for a shower chair, which is important.

In a rural setting, living in a house of one's own entails many responsibilities and maintaining a house poses difficulties for older persons for several reasons. Some move to a nursing home. Scattered, small populations and long distances in the northern communities (both in rural and urban settings) hamper access to services and employment. For example, providing home care where long distances are involved becomes very costly.

According to the informants, to be age-friendly the built environment should include appropriate housing or nursing home facilities, a summer cottage, adequate services, stores, roads and suitable transportation. For some, this would mean the opportunity to live in their own home and receiving support according to their needs, that is, ready access to health care, shops, post offices, banks and a pharmacy, all of which might be located at some distance. However, experiences and expectations differed among the respondents.

Older people living with their adult children in the same household may be a regular facet of some cultures (Sorrentino and Remmert, 2017) but not a viable custom in a new country. In a positive experience of the host culture in this regard, Shaila pointed out very emotionally that although she had opportunities from the beginning to stay with her son's family, she missed her independence and agency to some extent. Now she is living in her own house and states that "living in peace and freedom in my own house is important for me". Here distance is evident between Shaila's previous culture with intergenerational households and Nordic culture with independent households. This is a positive distance though because she seemed to prefer the Finnish custom over that in her native culture.

An "ageing in place" strategy is not applicable to older immigrants who have moved after age 60, as they are settling in a new country. Some have moved to have a more secure and safer life and some have come to live near their children. Many migrants still maintain strong connections with their country of origin or other communities where they have lived (Zechner, 2017, p. 575). These connections are varied – economic, social, cultural, political, institutional and emotional. The criticism has been voiced that the research has failed to address the complexity of immigrants' emotional and mental situation, focusing as it has on one or two factors without fully acknowledging that immigrants blend seamlessly into the living experience (Kelly and Lusi, 2006; Mölsä et al., 2017, p. 831). The immigrant interviewees in this study were satisfied with the well-equipped houses and the health services available in Finland. Although some come from countries where

the weather is completely different, they were still happy, as the heating systems in the houses were good.

Four of the native Finnish and Sámi informants living in a rural setting in their own house mentioned that during winter time clearing snow from a big yard is a difficult job. In most of the cases, family members, relatives or neighbors living nearby them help. Neighbors play an important role for those who are living in their own homes in urban as well as rural settings (Seifert and König, 2019). Transportation and good roads are important for access to shops and services. Heini, age 83, lives in an apartment near an urban setting; she has lived alone her whole life. She is taking care of her 86-year-old brother, who lives three kilometers from her. She has a car and still drives. In emphasizing the importance of transportation, she noted that “my friend who lives here used to use a private transport service, a small bus which costs one euro each way. This minibus takes older people into the city”. She stated that they still have public transportation but neither the frequency with which buses run nor the services are not suitable for older people. According to informants, although some areas in the North have public transportation available, it does not run frequently. Moreover, there has long been a lack of barrier-free transport in rural areas (Gray et al., 2006).

Heini was not happy with public services. For example, she had a very negative impression of the local nursing home, commenting and said, “when I am older and physically fragile, I would like to buy cleaning services and meals. I would like to keep living in my apartment, not live in a nursing home”. None of the informants wanted to live in a nursing home. In this regard, Heini said:

My mother was 82 years old when she got dementia and moved into a nursing home, she lived there more than 10 years. The nurses did not have time to take the residents out for a walk. They did no more than feed my mother; they did not speak with her. ... There were too few nurses. They need more nurses to take care of the residents.

Raising the same issue, Inari, 73, mentioned, with sadness, that

caregivers receive a poor salary and they are leaving to work in other sectors. In the North, there are many vacant positions in the care sector; people are not interested in the work.

It is very clear from Inari’s comment that older people are worried about the shortage of caregivers and emphasize the importance of care services. With poor payment and pressure to do overtime causing many practical nurses to leave the profession (Ruotsalainen et al., 2020), a distance emerges between the service needs and the resources (workforce) required to provide them.

Manu, 77, who receives social and health services from the municipality daily, pointed out the following:

Although a practical nurse comes to my home every day for 30 minutes, checking my medicine, putting medicine in the Robot and talking with me,

my friends, who do not have large enough pensions, are struggling to adjust with their everyday needs. Because of privatization, services are now very costly and the quality of the services is declining.

Appropriate and accessible housing, as well as adequate services, are important if people from all groups in the North are to live independently and maintain the everyday life they have had. There is a distance between home and institution. Having neighbors to help clear snow, for example, helps to overcome an obstacle that would force this distance upon an older person.

Distances and differences in the social environment

My data indicate that one of the crucial features of an age-friendly social environment in the North, in both rural and urban settings, is the opportunity to maintain relationships with family, friends and neighbors within the community. This finding accords with that of the WHO (2006) indicating that support from family and friends is an important component of an AFE. Other salient factors identified in the descriptions of my informants are opportunities to have agency to make decisions; opportunities to learn the language and other aspects of communication; feeling useful; feeling that one has potential and self-respect; and opportunities to engage in cultural, religious and local activities. Remaining involved in different activities plays an important role for many older people who are living in their own house or apartment and are still physically strong. Yet this does not always mean that older people need to be involved in activities outside the home. Some of the older interviewees were happy reading books, watching TV, listening to the radio and doing household chores.

In the Finnish North, in a small community, a neighborhood in a city, the countryside or even a village, saying hello when you pick up the post, meeting on the road or stairs and knowing others in one's surroundings give people a very good feeling and a feeling of security. This is the case even though people might meet or see each other on a regular basis. Language is the principal barrier for immigrants in accessing opportunities (Pot et al., 2020; Brehob, 2021). Older immigrants in my sample needed help from translator services or, in one case, from a daughter-in-law. For older immigrants, the language barrier (Kemper and Harden, 1999) creates distance in communication that hampers integration into the community and in receiving important information compared to Finnish- and Sámi-speaking people. Place is a complex structure with a dynamic interaction of structural and procedural, leading to different outcomes for individuals, social groups and cultures (Moore, 2017). Despite the complexity and distances, Shaila feels very happy that "here people don't interfere in each other's lives". However, she went on to note:

I miss celebrating religious occasions, watching TV with family members. According to my daughter-in-law and son, napping or sleeping with grandchildren is not permitted in this culture although this creates a close relationship between older and young generations. I do not understand why I cannot do it since my grandchildren also want it.

Johanna, 86, who sold her house to her oldest son and was living in a rented apartment in a city, did not feel a close connection with her neighbor. In winter, she had no activities which she could do, but in summer, she went cycling and shopping for groceries. She missed her childhood environment. This is a social distance to her earlier life, where she was more active. The apartment where she lived at the time of the interview was built in the year 1956. Repairs were scheduled to begin in the building, and she mentioned that it is difficult to manage with a small pension such as hers when someone needs to live alone in a city. Repairs will soon begin in the apartment. She said happily that “when the repairs start, I will go to stay at my son’s house, which earlier was our family home”. The village where she was brought up is 80 km from the city. Although she needs to go stay for a while a long distance from her home in the city, it will give her opportunities to reduce the emotional distance to a location (her original home) which evokes pleasant memories.

Regarding food, Shaila misses the local food in her former homeland and stated that

the food here is much different than our food ... [I’m] missing vegetables and fishes. In the North there are very few grocery shops where multicultural foods can be bought; there are far more in the southern part of the country.

In the beginning, Shaila felt that her home country was better since people are “closely attached to each other and do religious practices together”, but now she feels that this robs one of a certain liberty, dictating what “you can do and what you cannot”. In evaluating the host country’s culture, she stated that “here ... people have some distance from each other. A long distance is not good but a small distance is, because it gives you space for yourself”. For some immigrants, family means not only husband or wife and children, but also parents, uncles, aunts and cousins. This thinking is common in some Asian countries. Shaila was motivated to learn Finnish. In this connection, she noted,

I would like to work so that I could be a useful member of this society. My son “M” and I have built a house near his house. It was hard work, both worked 12 hours a day throughout the summer to get it finished. I felt that it is a contribution to the assets of this country.

Here Shaila felt that building a house shortened a distance; she now felt closer to Finnish society this way. Some of the important activities Shaila mentioned were reading good books, praying to God, watching some of her favorite TV programs, cooking what she wanted, knitting and sewing, calling some friends or some poor students and needy people in her homeland and helping them, organizing get-togethers with some family friends, meeting her grandchildren daily and playing with them. Some of these activities served to shorten the emotional distance between her and her country of origin.

Adam, 85, receives a pension from both his country of origin and Finland. His better socio-economic position has kept many options open to reduce distances

compare to the other two immigrant men. He has very close connections with relatives living in different cities in Finland and is also frequently in touch with his son, who lives in their homeland. He mentioned:

I enjoy travelling to visit relatives in Finland quite often and attending many events which are organized by cities and third-sector organizations. Because of Covid I could not travel to my home country. I need to prove each year that I am alive to keep my pension and the travel restrictions made this difficult.

He said he tried to do something which makes him feel valuable. He noted,

I have a massage bed which I brought from my home country. If any of my friends has a problem then I ask them to use it. They can use it for 40 minutes.

Shortening distances by helping others makes Adam feel closer and valuable to his present community. The descriptions indicate that it is important to engage in different activities arranged by the municipalities and to organize social gatherings for older people living alone. Manu noted that Covid restrictions affected (Banerjee and Rai, 2020; Rantanen et al., 2021) the group activities in which he was involved. He enjoys meeting with friends and doing woodworking in an organization supported by the city. His only son, who lives in the southern part of the country with his family (which includes two grandchildren) a long distance away, used to meet him at least twice a year. They were unable to meet from the beginning of 2020 to summer 2021. But by calling each other frequently he has maintained the relationship, which is important.

Rauha, 81, is a Sámi and very involved in different activities. She said, “I go to church to sing, which I enjoy. I have a God-given singing voice and ear for music. Covid restrictions affected this activity”. Her children live in different parts of the country. She continued “I am now just travelling from one child’s place to another’s. My grandchildren are very important for me and I think they feel the same way, which makes me very happy”. Emphasizing the importance of a community bond, she pointed out that

earlier every family had many children; we played with neighbors’ children; we knew each other and had a very good bond to each other. We had very good community bonding that is missing nowadays in many communities.

Here the data reveal a distance in time (community life past and present) and within the community. Organizing different activities in one’s own Sámi community is important for older Sámi men and women. Having opportunities to be socially active, do volunteer work, engage in leisure activities and keep busy without feeling stretched to the limit were important for many older people in all groups. Some older people were less interested in the events organized by the municipalities. Some were only interested in leisure activities. Here one sees distances between events organized by the municipalities and leisure activities.

Antti, who is 78, mentioned:

I play volleyball in the nearby business school. Because of Covid it was closed last autumn. ... I went to the city with my wife, to the gym, and went outside for a walk in the nearby nature.

Older people in the North would essentially like to be involved in different social, cultural and leisure activities. They would like to contribute in many ways to becoming useful and important in their society, shortening the distance created when one gets older and tends to be less active.

Providing opportunities for volunteering that helps other people in the community may afford an important resource (van Dijk et al., 2013) both for native and immigrant older people to achieve some sort of status. Some older immigrant informants in this study preferred to live near service centers; as immigrants' socio-economic position is typically poor, they value ready access to services and the help available from NGOs and other voluntary organizations.

Summary: Distances shaping Finnish AFEs

This study has indicated that for different groups of older people an AFE includes having a feeling of attachment and connection to the place where they live, a sense of security and familiarity with their living environments, and a feeling that they have caring relationships and roles, including individuality and autonomy. In the Finnish Arctic, older people would like to live in an environment where they feel secure and comfortable. For native Finns and older Sámi, geographical distance from residential areas and nearby cities figured as positive features in that the distance allowed them to live far from pollution and crowds. They would prefer to live in an environment which is peaceful, safe and near nature. Meeting people and participating in cultural and community events played a crucial role in the well-being of all groups of older people.

I have also found that not all components of an AFE are equally important for all groups of people. The distances reflected in the experiences of the informants interviewed vary based on the ways in which they related to different domains of AFEs. These experiences were also connected with individuals' overall health and well-being. In an additional finding, the nature and impact of the distances that figured in the informants' lives, and thus in their conception of an AFE, hinged on the individuals' socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, fragile physical health and barriers to getting information and ability to communicate create.

The study has drawn on the concept of distance, which captures the positive and negative senses of intervening space: The positive sense includes long distances from crowds, crime and congestion and short distances to nature, a garden and the gym; the negative sense signals detachment, that is, distance in time, within the community, between natives and newcomers, as well as inadequate access to services or obstacles to maintaining social relationships. Both types of distance may be at work in the same individual's life: Despite the considerable geographical distance from their country of origin, older immigrants who live in the Finnish

Arctic enjoy a healthy and secure environment (less crime) and have better social and healthcare services compared to those in their former homeland. The distances and pandemic restrictions have prevented older immigrants traveling to their country of origin and Sámi people meeting with their relatives who live in countries bordering Finland.

Having adequate resources and income helps to bridge distances and may contribute to an older person perceiving their environment as age-friendly. A poor financial situation can create both mental and physical distances among vulnerable people from all groups. Due to a lack of availability of foods and a lack of religious and cultural activities (compounded by an insufficient number of people from their own culture), some of the immigrant older people cannot practice their culture or religion. In these kinds of situations, older immigrants, as well as Sámi, become emotionally and culturally distant compared to other groups. For some older people, moving from Asia to Finland to live a long distance from the country of their birth, with very different weather, a different demographical structure and cultural differences has created feelings of socio-cultural, physical and mental distance. Older immigrants who have moved from Europe do not feel same way. In an AFE, the needs and expectations of all groups of older people should be accommodated.

Characteristics of places impact the way in which older people become engaged in different activities. In recent research, Sheila Peace (2022) has considered how places contextualize personal experience in diverse environments. Even though scattered populations in rural setting mean that not all services are available at long distances, native Finnish and Indigenous older people would like to stay in their own villages as long as they can with the help of family members, friends and neighbors. Older immigrant men and some of the other groups of older men wanted to keep active with different social events and volunteer work and spend time with friends. Older women from all groups are more occupied with helping their children and taking care of grandchildren and enjoying time with them.

This study contributes to the work on AFEs by exploring detailed experiences of older people from different groups. This kind of approach is needed because the features and domains of AFEs cannot be treated separately from factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, place, socio-economic status and functional capacity.

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