Marie was an 83-year-old widow. She lived alone in a small brick house in a working-class inner-city neighborhood in the northeastern United States. When her husband purchased the home, 57 years before I met her, the neighborhood was a vibrant French-Canadian community. In recent years, zone-in-transition land uses had encroached, stores and social institutions had closed, and a low-income renter population had filtered into the dilapidated housing stock. Younger, more affluent households, including those of her children, had long since opted for suburban living, as the locality had become increasingly inhospitable with frequent incidents of violent crime, arson, and vandalism. Marie and most of her elderly peers, however, still dwelled in the neighborhood they knew as home.

How did Marie cope with the experience of growing old in this seemingly inhospitable setting? Had the inexorable erosion of her physical and sensory capabilities and growing alienation from the contemporary neighborhood's social milieu resulted in spatial withdrawal? How was she affected by the prospect of the neighborhood's eventual demise—the passing of this place she had known?

To my initial bewilderment, Marie seemed uninterested in these questions I had culled from extensive review and reflection on the literature on aging. She was reluctant to talk about physical restriction, reduced access to services, spending more time at home, problems of social abandonment, or fears of the future. Instead, as we sat in her parlor poring over treasured scrapbooks in which she kept a record of her life, she would animatedly describe trips she had taken to Florida many years previously. She would muse on the current activities of her granddaughter in Detroit, a thousand miles distant. She would describe incidents in the neighborhood during the early years of her residence. Blinded by preconceptions, I could not comprehend at first the richness of the taken-for-granted lifeworld she was unveiling.

The recent emergence of humanistic geography is premised on reveal-
ing such lifeworlds in terms of meanings, values, and intentionalities which permeate them (Tuan, 1976; Entikin, 1976; Ley and Samuels, 1978). An outpouring of good intention has resulted in intriguing and perceptive commentary on the manner in which individuals and groups experience the spaces and places of their lives (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Seamon, 1979). In terms of acceptance, both within and outside the discipline, much of this work is pervaded by an image of esotericism. But humanistic geography is far from esoteric. Recently, researchers have begun to harness more directly the potential of the perspective for making pragmatic contributions to theory construction, clinical practice, and the formation of public policy more sensitive to life experience (Godkin, 1977; Rowles, 1979). This essay seeks to complement the trend. I offer an interpretation of Marie’s geographical experience – her involvement within the spaces and places of her life – and that of several of her age peers which was gradually revealed as I became more deeply immersed in the subjectivity of their lives. This interpretation is presented and assessed as a contribution to the development of a humanistic geography of growing old.1

An Exploration

Societal lore reinforces an empiricist image of the older person’s geographical experience pervaded by a motif of closure – of progressive imprisonment within a more limited space (Pastalan, 1971, 2; Montgomery, 1977, 253). Reduced biological, psychological and social capabilities are widely considered to be accentuated by increasingly insistent environmental constraints, including barriers imposed by design of the physical setting, economic deprivations, transportation restrictions, social spatial isolation, and confining societal attitudes. The outcome, it is argued, is a progressively more limited activity orbit and, as environmental vulnerability increases, a growing concern for remaining in secure and familiar settings.

The image is clearly naive, indeed almost a parody, but is deeply ingrained in the gerontology literature and often internalized by the elderly. One reason for its durability is a grounding in studies of overt behavior patterns – the most easily monitored manifestations of geographical experience. In contrast, there is a paucity of inquiry into older people’s perceptual orientation within large-scale environments, their emotional and generally prereflective identification with the places of their lives, and the way in which life experience is incorporated within the constitution of a lifeworld. A sensitivity to these levels of experience, I discovered, was essential for understanding Marie. Moreover, in a developed world where the elderly are becoming an increasingly significant vulnerable population, it is becoming ever more apparent that there is a need to develop a more sophisticated perspective on the changing relationship between the older person and his or her environmental context – one comparable to our growing awareness of the changing spatial world of the child.

To evolve preliminary insight, I undertook a three-year in-depth study of five elderly individuals. In addition to Marie, I came to know Evelyn (76 years old), Edward (80), Raymond (69), and Stan (68). All had resided in the neighborhood for over forty years. A close interpersonal relationship developed with each participant as, during frequent meetings, we mutually explored a hitherto taken-for-granted aspect of their lives. Data-gathering in a formal sense was limited. Instead, through intersubjective encounter, I sought immersion within the participants’ lifeworlds and to learn through ‘creative dialogue’ in a process of mutual discovery (Von Eckartsberg, 1971; Rowles, 1978b). A collection of materials was assembled on each person, comprising reams of notes, photographs, and sketch maps; and many hours of taped conversations.

Making sense of the experience was an inductive process in which I made a conscious effort to transcend preconceptions and to derive insight solely from the ‘text’ of the encounters. I drafted a detailed descriptive vignette on each person. Using their own words, I sought to portray the subtle complexity of each participant’s life-style and involvement within the spaces and places of his or her life.2 As I worked on the vignettes, I searched for consistent shared themes in geographical experience. This involved the honing of insights emerging during our exchanges, together with a classifying and reclassifying of material from the tape recordings, over several months of post-field-work reflection. Finally, I held a series of meetings with participants to present a slowly crystallizing perspective and to solicit feedback.

Modalities of Geographical Experience

The participants’ geographical experience expressed a subtle meshing of space and time, embracing not only physical and cognitive involvement within their contemporary neighborhood, but also vicarious participation in an array of displaced environments. I eventually isolated four
distinct but overlapping experiential modalities — action, orientation, feeling, and fantasy.

Action

Action involved physical locomotion on three conceptually distinguishable levels. Movement within the proximate physical setting, such as reaching for a cupboard or traversing a room, was designated as immediate action. All the participants admitted to declining bodily agility. Their actions on this level exhibited increasingly efficient use of space within their homes and conservation of personal energy — manifest in the closing off of unneeded, less accessible rooms and the judicious rearrangement of furniture and appliances.

On a larger scale, everyday activity consisted of routine service, social, and recreational trips. These were generally confined to the city and seemed by their regularity to provide a time-space rhythm within the participants' lives. Actions on this level had also become more limited and selective as the participants accommodated to growing old. Trips were confined to daylight hours. Shopping was often undertaken by family or friends; the radio sermon substituted for the journey to church; visits to friends became more localized or replaced by lengthy telephone conversations.

A third class of actions, occasional trips, confounded the stereotype. In spite of the economic constraints under which they lived, the participants made occasional trips to visit their families or vacations to locations far from their homes. Evelyn, the summer before I met her, was subsidized by her family to visit a son in Arizona. 'My first time I ever flown, too!' she exclaimed. Raymond spent three months with a daughter in Arkansas and four with a son in North Dakota. Maria had taken a lengthy trip, traveling first to Florida to visit her daughter, then to Detroit to stay with her son, and finally to Quebec to revisit her birthplace. The participants had made such trips more frequently as they had grown older.

Orientation

Actions were framed in terms of a cognitive differentiation of space involving schemata — mental representations of physical-social space providing orientation within a 'known' world (Tuan, 1975a; Downs and Stea, 1973, 1977; Moore and Golledge, 1976). A personal schema furnished implicit psychobiological orientation — a preconscious sense of left and right, horizontal and vertical, back and front (Bollnow, 1967, 179; Howard and Templeton, 1966). Physiological decrements associated

with aging often make it difficult to maintain balance (Shephard, 1978, 134). As they had grown older, Stan and Edward had compensated by using a cane; and all five participants tended to avoid open spaces and settings lacking environmental supports.

Similar adaptation was apparent in an intimate awareness of familiar routes. Stan, a regular patron of local bars, would shuffle from one establishment to another tracing consistent paths. Sensitive to cracks in the sidewalk, he knew the paths affording shade on a hot afternoon and safety on the icy days he dreaded. He was aware of the street crossings most hazardous during lunchtime traffic. He had internalized a series of detailed 'specific' linear schemata which facilitated his routinized movement under diverse environmental conditions.

Such specific schemata were embedded within a superordinate general schema which represented a more basic differentiation of milieu into a series of experientially distinctive annular domains. Home, fulcrum of the lifeworld, was possessed inviolable space. Immediately outside, a narrow surveillance zone, encompassing the field of vision from the home, was distinguished by a sense of partial control and watchful reciprocity among neighbors. As Raymond remarked:

I check on her when she puts her shades down. Almost every day I look out. If there's a light there and I see it, I'll wave. She knows that I'm home. And then if anything should happen, she can grab the phone and call me.

Another neighbor monitored Raymond: 'If he don't see me at night sitting down on the couch watching television, he'll come bounding over here, to see if anything's wrong.' The neighborhood was less clearly sensed as a physical space but clearly distinguished as social space, the territorial preserve of a French-Canadian community. Incorporation of the city and spaces beyond tended to be more fragmentary and amorphous. However, significant 'privileged places' such as the homes of children, former residences, and vacation resorts were known in intimate detail. They stood out as anchoring points within the landscape of the general schema.

Feeling

This experiential landscape was more than a static pictorial representation: it was a shifting collage, tinted subtly by a reservoir of feeling infused within individual locations and in turn evoked by them. Over the years, layer upon layer of experience became incorporated within the
cognized meaning of particular settings; they emerged as affective symbols providing extensions of individual identity (Ley, 1977, 508). For Marie, the ramshackle hall where many years ago she danced in a red velvet dress on her silver wedding anniversary would always be a special place. It was a focus of personal feeling.

Rarely are meanings fully private. Places are also imbued with shared feelings. They become ‘fields of care’ (Tuan, 1975b, 236). Sentiments for neighborhood space, held in common and reinforced by interaction among a social network of elderly age peers, expressed a mutual sense of belonging and continuity with the community of a more auspicious past. Such feelings provided reassurance in accommodating to distressing contemporary environmental change. The supportive potential of shared affinity for place was often subtly revealed. When questioned directly, the participants could list few close friends. However, when confronted with a comprehensive listing of 455 elderly neighborhood residents, invariably at least 200 could be identified and anecdotes recounted pertaining to each one. Relationships had often developed many years previously. In some cases, unknown to the participants, identified individuals were no longer alive. This was immaterial, for a symbolic presence was enough to sustain a sense of belonging.

**Fantasy**

Perhaps the most interesting findings pertain to a fourth modality of geographical experience – fantasy. This term is not used in any negative, demeaning, or perjurious sense, but as a general designation for a modality of experience having particular significance within the totality of the participants' geographical experience. Recall my opening observations on Marie’s reluctance to focus on what I had preconceived as her environmental experience. She was not alone. Listening to the tapes it became apparent that for long stretches of conversation, the participants’ thoughts were far removed from the rooms in which we sat. Stan mused on the Poland of his boyhood; Evelyn during reflective monologues participated in the affairs of a son in Arizona; all the participants frequently reminisced on events in the neighborhood of the past. Gradually I came to appreciate the significance of such activity. Vicarious immersion in event implies vicarious immersion in place: it facilitates a transcendence of location.

Two forms of fantasy could be distinguished. **Reflective geographical fantasy** involved reminiscence, a selective participation in environments of the past. Marie could re-enter the neighborhood of 1930:

> On Imperial Street there used to be a lot of stores. There was a grocery store there, and jewelry shop, and barber’s shop... and on the other side there was a fish market. Two grocery stores on the other side of the street. Mercier used to have a meat market at the back and grocery store at the front. They used to have a church there right on the corner of Easthull and Imperial. Father Deigneaux used to say Mass down there.

The place in which she currently dwelled was far more than the physically deteriorating contemporary setting I could view. It was a series of places through time. Each could be evoked as incidents were recalled. Marie could also rehabit selectively reconstituted places of her childhood. Indeed, in reverie, the participants immersed themselves in settings expressing the entire time-space continuum of their personal histories.

**Projective geographical fantasy** transported the participants to spatially removed contemporary milieu – notably environments where their children resided. Raymond had a garden at his daughter’s home in Arkansas which he ‘tended’ with care from a distance of many hundreds of miles. Evelyn often ‘participated’ in an Arizona family: savoring a graduation, sharing a concern over the inclement weather she monitored through television forecasts, musing over the everyday affairs of a distant household. This tendency for projection into the worlds of children has been noted by Hochschild, who describes a propensity for ‘altruistic surrender’ as the older person lives through the experience of a child and gains a sense of intimacy and identification compensating for spatial separation (Hochschild, 1973, 96-111).

Clearly, the four modalities of geographical experience are not mutually exclusive. They comprise dimensions of a total complex of ‘being’ within a lifeworld (summarized in Figure 2.1). Geographical experience, at least for Stan, Marie, Raymond, Evelyn, and Edward, involved more than mere behavioristic locomotion through timeless Cartesian space. Rather, it was a fusion of implicit awareness, thought, and action, entailing holistic involvement within a ‘lived space’ — a life-world with temporal depth and meaning as well as spatial extent. Each participant’s geographical experience revealed internal consistency, a consonance among the modalities. In concert, these modalities expressed a current experiential state of adjustment within a dynamic person-environment transactional system.
The Geographical Experience of Growing Old

The perspective developed through collaboration with Marie and her peers could, of course, mirror the experience of individuals of any age. The important question is whether it is possible to develop one stage further and to identify distinctive transitions in geographical experience associated with growing old.

Observation and lengthy discussions with the participants suggested that it is not so much the structure of geographical experience that changes as emphasis among the modalities which changes with advancing age. There is a progressive *limitation in the realm of action* accompanied by *expansion in the role of geographical fantasy*. Withdrawal from full physical environmental participation was compensated by greater emphasis upon contemplative vicarious modes of environmental participation. This hypothesis is consistent with research indicating a propensity for increasing ‘interiority,’ reminiscence, and a process of life review among the elderly (Neugarten et al., 1964; McMahon and Rhudick, 1967; Lewis, 1971; Butler, 1963; Coleman, 1974). The process expressed an accommodation to growing old which, for the participants, provided liberation from the time-space constrictions of personal decline and a deteriorating contemporary neighborhood.

This major transition was accompanied by a series of associated changes in both orientation within space and feeling about place. These reflected a selective intensification of cognitive involvement. Specific schemata for remaining paths of action had become more refined. Familiarity with space facilitated progressive reorientation as the older person adjusted to declining physical and psychological capability. Guiding landmarks and potential hazards were highlighted through ‘selective attention’ to salient environmental features – cracks in the sidewalk, dangerous street crossings, potential resting places, and so on. As more time was spent at home, there was an intensification in the importance of proximate zones (especially the home and surveillance zone) and – because of increasing vicarious involvement within them – in significant displaced environments within the general schema. Transitions in the participants’ feelings for place included intensified affective bonds with proximate space, environments of their children, and other locations of meaning within their life histories.

In sum, as the participants had grown older, the total complex of their geographical experience had evolved in a coherent and consistent manner. The process involved more than a sequence in states of being. It traced a path of becoming. Through a series of generally unconscious
incremental adjustments in the modalities of geographical experience, Marie and her peers had progressively reconciled a desire to maintain a familiar life-style with the necessity for innovation in adapting to changing personal and environmental circumstances.

Could this emerging perspective, developed from an intensive experimental study of five individuals, serve as a baseline for a developmental geography of growing old? Exploratory findings clearly require cautious interpretation, particularly when it comes to making more general inferences. Although multiple observations were made, the study involved few participants. The relatively brief three-year span of my work with Marie and her peers renders conclusions regarding developmental change necessarily speculative. Replication is also essential. However, here I am concerned with moving beyond these standard epistemological considerations. It is now several years since I last saw Marie. The vision provided by reflection has served to bring substantive issues I ignored in my original interpretation into clearer focus. Two are elaborated here: the role of contextual factors in uniquely shaping each older person's geographical experience; the thorny problem of differentiating among the effects of aging, membership in a particular age cohort, and 'ageism.'

Contextual Aspects of Geographical Experience

Consider the personality context of each older person's life. Marie's effusive outgoing personality dictated a life-style of frenetic action. She toiled from dawn to dusk at a home-based dress repair business, was an active member in clubs and societies, and often extended herself to the point of exhaustion in pursuing a rigorous daily routine. At the same time she was timorous and alienated from the contemporary neighborhood. This was no longer the place she had known. At night the space outside her home became suffused with feelings of threat. She became reluctant to venture forth and would transform her home into a fortress before retiring. After locking all her doors and further securing them with rope, she slept with a loaded pistol readily at hand and a steel ball secured to her wrist by a leather thong. More subtle infusion of personality within her geographical experience was manifest in a strong familism. This was apparent in her benign protective monitoring of the activities of neighborhood children as they passed through the surveillance zone outside her home, and in the environments she chose to inhabit in fantasy. She tended to reconstitute and savor family places, both joyous and tragic; the piazza of 1933 where she danced with her children; the scene of an anniversary celebration; the solemnity of an Arlington graveside when a son was buried - all events and places reinforcing a sense of worth as a loving, successful mother.

Stan, by contrast, was not limited in his wanderings around the neighborhood by any nocturnal timidity. He was more stoic than Marie: A dogged 'work' ethos pervaded his personality and was reflected in the monotonous rhythm of an almost invariant post-retirement routine of daily trips from bar to bar. Even his geographical fantasy typically involved work environments of his past, extending back to vivid images of toiling in his youth behind a team of straining horses in a Polish field. Clearly, variation in personality results in a great diversity of emphasis in the manner in which the modalities of geographical experience find expression in each person's life.

Understanding the infusion of personality within geographical experience entails consideration of the older person's autobiographical context. Each life history represents a stream of experience. A residue of rhythms and routines evolved over the lifespan furnishes a template framing a lifeworld in the present (Buttimer, 1976). Here, the sheer length of older people's lives poses a dilemma. To some extent one can generalize about infant behavior. From the breast to the nursery there is much commonality in human experience. As children mature, however, experience diverges - one adolescent remains single and goes to college, another marries and works in a factory. After seventy or eighty years, life paths have become completely individualistic, each defining a unique reservoir of experience. Generalization becomes exceedingly tenuous.

The significance of personality is further elaborated in considering the role of the physical context in framing and enriching geographical experience. Clearly, design of the physical context sets limits on the older person's pattern of action. The physical environment also conditions orientation and becomes the repository for a distinctive array of feelings. Beyond this, however, in the process of living within a place, older people gradually develop a reservoir of environmental cues evoking geographical fantasy. Some cues were self-selected. There were Marie's scrapbooks, the clock which Raymond kept on his mantel informing him of the time in Tokyo where his son resided, prominently displayed photographs of family, mementoes of fondly remembered trips, and other treasured artifacts. Other cues were inherent in the neighborhood context. These included important buildings, such as the dilapidated hall where Marie had once danced, and other environmental features of significance within personal history. All these cues were selectively perceived and utilized in sustaining a pattern of geographical
experience which both expressed and at the same time reinforced identity and rootedness in place. Indeed, the physical context as subjectively constituted within the participants’ experience became an extension of their personalities. Neighborhood transition was ultimately a threat to the self.

When one acknowledges that lives are not only intertwined with place but also with people, the contextual issue becomes even more complicated. Older people live in diverse family contexts including two-person households, the traditional multi-generational family, age peer group ‘families’ of friends, and a variety of other living arrangements (Treas, 1975; Sussman, 1976). Living arrangements and their associated social milieu may profoundly influence geographical experience. Some older people are alone and, by choice or fate, have limited access to social support. Their actions are limited by the absence of rides and other resources a family provides. If there is no one to visit and limited opportunity for vicarious projection into the lives of others, reflective geographical fantasy may become a dominant modality. On the other hand, the geographical experience of a person like Evelyn – the fulcrum of a vast family network providing both direct and indirect support (Osterreich, 1965) – embraces both occasional trips to distant locations where her children reside and a rich world of projective geographical fantasy.

Social involvement extends beyond the family. Most older people’s geographical experience reflects their allegiance to a variety of social networks. In particular, geographical experience may be molded by the social mores of a local community context. Significant regional variations exist in community conceptions of appropriate behavior for an older person. These are internalized by elderly residents (Lozier, 1975; Lozier and Althouse, 1975). Thus Marie’s geographical experience is in part an accommodation to a set of expectations inherent within the culture of the particular French-Canadian neighborhood community of which she is a member. These expectations prescribe an active participation in her church (although absence from services during inclement weather is sanctioned); the development of strong concern for home and neighborhood space; and the maintenance of affinity for the locality in Quebec from which she and many of her neighbors originally migrated.

Finally, the pervasive influence of a specific societal context must be acknowledged. This is most apparent when aging is viewed cross-culturally (Cowgill and Holmes, 1972; Gutmann, 1977). The participants’ geographical experience is one manifestation of a self-perceived role within a technological society which until recently devalued its non-productive members. Stan embodied the internalization of an ethos of redundancy: ‘Funny world, I tell you that. You struggle, struggle, work, work. Then when you get through work, you’re ready to die. That’s the end of you.’ The resulting alienation encourages physical withdrawal and sanctions introspection and increasing emphasis upon vicarious forms of environmental participation. A societal image becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Aging, Age Cohorts, or ‘Ageism’?

The influence of the societal context on the evolving mosaic of the older person’s geographical experience introduces a second set of issues which loom more prominently in retrospect. These are an extension of the perennial nature-nurture dilemma. How can one distinguish among changes attributable to inherent biological and psychological processes of aging – changes stemming from membership in a specific generation or cohort of older people, and changes resulting from the impact of the particular societal context in which the person is growing old? This knotty trilemma has been a major focus of debate in gerontology (Neugarten and Datan, 1973; Schaie, 1977).

Certain biological and psychological changes are attributable to aging of the human organism (Finch and Hayflick, 1977; Birren and Schaie, 1977). For example, there is a propensity for collapse of the spinal column, reduced lung capacity, calcification of ligaments, reduced circulatory system capability, and sensory decrements in sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. Each of these changes modifies the individual’s experience of the physical environment. Impairments, however, are selective. Many older people do not experience them all, nor do transitions occur at comparable rates. For these reasons, it is difficult to specify particular physiological changes as universal attendants of growing old, and to link such changes to consistent transitions in geographical experience.

The problem of physiological variability is compounded by age-cohort differences. The geographical experience of Marie, born in 1890, is different from that which a person born twenty years later can anticipate when she attains 83 years of age. Different cohorts of elderly people experience distinctive life histories in terms of the events which impinge upon them during critical phases in their lives. Marie’s generation was profoundly influenced by the experience of raising children during the Great Depression. For people born twenty years later this same event was
experienced from the vantage point of late adolescence and hence differently incorporated into autobiography. Recognizing cohort differences in the geographical experience of growing old implies that revelations about today’s elderly may be of limited value in understanding those who follow them, even in the same neighborhood.\textsuperscript{5}

A complementary aspect of this argument lies in considering the impact of the contemporary societal environment at the time when the individual is growing old. The societal context of aging in 1974 when I spent much time with Marie was different from what it will be in 1994 when a person twenty years her junior will be the same age. For Marie, being 83 years old in an inner-city neighborhood was to accommodate to an ethos of ‘ageism’ in which her place was defined by an array of societal stereotypes and diverse forms of overt and covert discrimination (Butler, 1975). Her geographical experience with its emphasis upon vicarious environmental participation in displaced milieu may be understood as a creative adaptation to this situation. That many of her peers had made similar accommodations may indicate no more than limited temporal-spatial consistency in the geography of growing old.

Perspective

Looking back on my work with Marie and her peers with the wisdom of hindsight, it is tempting at first to conclude that the insights I obtained are suggestive, even tantalizing, but essentially fragile. To reach this conclusion, however, would be to remain within the limiting confines of a narrowly defined empiricist view and to ignore the humanistic emphasis of the study. Descriptive understanding of Marie’s involvement within the spaces and places of her life provides an authentic representation of the reality of growing old as experienced by one person dwelling within a specific spatio-temporal setting. Much of what is significant in her geographical experience stems from her unique life experience and the kind of person she has come to be. It is beyond the realm of generalization. The essence here lies in understanding. Understanding, it can be said, is the deeper level of awareness which arises from drawing close enough to a person to become a sympathetic participant within her life-world and to have her integrally involved in one’s own. Understanding has value in itself: indeed, it should be a major goal of scholarly endeavor.

Understanding individual experience in all its complexity is a necessary prelude to constructing sensitive theory. This is a major theme I have sought to illustrate in this essay. The quest for understanding, through its very process - the revelation of essential themes through interpersonal dialogue - provides for internal critique in the process of data generation. Potential for the naive stereotyping which characterized my initial view of Marie’s geographical experience is reduced.

The process of abstraction from the taken-for-granted coherence of direct experience to a formal conceptualization involves a qualitative transition in both the language and substance of knowing. Translation from the prerelative understanding of everyday life to the language of social science mirrors an operational categorization of what is in experience an undifferentiated coherent whole. This process reduces experience, but it is valuable for comprehending and communicating the complexity of lives if the categories represent authentic, inherently experiential themes. However, to the degree that a conceptualization becomes the imposed structuring of an outsider who is separated from the experience, an inevitable discordance arises between the two levels of knowing. Moreover, over time, as caveats and elaborations such as I have presented are incorporated, what originates as an authentic translation from experience may come to assume a life of its own, independent of the existential reality from which it originated. By manipulating emergent themes in a search for more sophisticated explanation, there is an ever-present danger of falling into the reductionist trap of considering as legitimate only those aspects of experience which can be generalized. In so doing much of the richness of individual experience is cast aside. An understanding of person as subject — the author of a unique biography lived within a colorful lifeworld — is rejected. Ironically, as we progress toward more sophisticated explanation in developing a geography of growing old, our understanding may become progressively impoverished. Yet to the humanist geographer it is the understanding that is ultimately most important.

Notes

1. In this essay an older person is defined as a person over 65 years of age. This designation is an arbitrary choice. Chronological age is, of course, only one of many possible measures of aging. There are important differences among biological, psychological and social aging processes. Moreover, rates of aging in these domains vary considerably among individuals.

2. These vignettes provide a primary evidential basis for a study such as this, for they reveal the 'life history' of the experience (Becker, 1958; Rowles, 1979b). Unfortunately, space precludes the presentation of all this material here.

3. Confirmation of this pattern in ongoing research I am conducting with a
population of elderly residents of an Appalachian community suggests that increased propensity for long-distance trips may be a characteristic feature of the older person’s experience, at least in the United States, particularly in the years immediately following retirement.

4. Occasional trips constituted a significant exception to this overall pattern. However, anticipation of these trips often generated vivid projective geographical fantasy, and fond recollection of such vacations was an important source of reflective geographical fantasy.

5. This problem raises sobering methodological questions regarding inferences of developmental change derived from cross-sectional rather than longitudinal studies (Schaie, 1967; Maddox and Wiley, 1976).

References


The places in a person's world are more than entities which provide the physical stage for life's drama. Some are profound centers of meanings and symbols of experience. As such, they lie at the core of human existence. This essay, drawing upon the life experiences of several alcoholics, demonstrates ways in which places become reservoirs of significant life experiences lying at the center of a person's identity and sense of psychological well-being.

As a context for the essay, some of the relevant literature examining the significance of places in the life experiences of people in general is first reviewed. Second, accounts of the lives of three alcoholics are drawn upon to demonstrate the ways in which sensory images of places become woven into the life experiences and identities of individuals. Third, the possibility of developing a modality of psychotherapy based on place-image chronologies is discussed. Finally, some implications of the findings are examined with respect to issues of the design and planning of therapeutic settings and the possible contributions of behavioral geography to an understanding of human behavior and experience.

The Human Experience of Place

The existential significance of places has been acknowledged in various definitions which characterize places as the 'focus of meanings or intention, either culturally or individually defined' (Relph, 1976, 55), or entities which 'incarnate the experience and aspirations of people' (Tuan, 1971, 281). This essay defines place as a discrete, temporally and perceptually bounded unit of psychologically meaningful material space.

Much of the literature on the experiential dimensions of place has focused on those places to which shared meanings or common symbols are attached by certain groups of individuals. These can be places which evoke some sense of belonging to a social group and provide a sense of group identity. Such places exist at various scales. Relph (1976) has identified, for example, the Red Square in Moscow, Niagara Falls and