

AGING ALONE IN THE FAMILY HOME:
EXPLORING PLACE ATTACHMENT AND PERSONAL ADAPTATION

Gloria Eaton Stafford

Ruth Brent Tofle, PhD, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

It is generally understood that many elders wish to remain at home during their final years. A long-occupied residence holds precious memories and feels secure. To that end, both researchers, designers, and care providers have concentrated efforts on identifying best practices for extending elders' independence and reducing risk of injury while remaining at home. Within aging-in-place literature, it has been increasingly acknowledged that home modifications—such as the addition of ramps, first-level toilet rooms, non-slip flooring, grab bars, and curb-less showers—can be effective means to reducing risks, and increasing independence. Within literature, study findings often report on corresponding improvements to functioning or reductions in trauma. Such research endeavors regard the home as a physical space in which to perform tasks.

To begin to complete the picture within the knowledge base—particularly concerning the oldest-old living alone—this study shifts the emphasis from the oft-used intervention approach in aging-in-place research to one focusing on tangible environment-behavior transactions. Shifting away from regarding aging-in-place as a problem to be solved, a grounded theory approach aims to illuminate the experience through empathetic open-ended interviewing with the person's experience itself as the focus of inquiry.

Ten participants between age 88 and 100 who lived alone were interviewed and observed in their homes over several sessions to explore what creative personal adaptations and modifications—related to use of space and interaction with elements of the home—elders themselves utilized to accommodate for diminished capabilities while living in the same, long-occupied residential setting. Building theory grounded in data, the research findings elucidated the remarkably adaptive nature of older people over time and revealed enduring attachments to home.